

I'm Sorry to Hear That

Research Thesis

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by

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Walking Down the Corn

I hadn't put much thought into people leaving our small, Ohio town. Until the winter before my graduation, I thought that people lived and died in the same place they were grown. But something shifted along with the snow drifts and the cold winds; people got restless and started to leave. Some slipped away without warning like my father who snuck out in the middle of the night to be with the chubby woman from church. She used to sit close to our pew, singing in a high pitched whistle while I counted cracks in the ceiling. Now her place in church was empty along with my father's. Others, like my friends, were moving at top speed towards graduation with plans for the rest of their lives that didn't include me. My two best friends were starting college on the west coast in the fall and intended to cap off the summer by hitchhiking across two states to see a band. I told myself I didn't ask which band because I didn't care, but to be honest I wanted to be there with them, thumb pointed out towards the road. My girlfriend, Annie, was going to college in New York. For her school was just a backup because she planned to be discovered while she was living in the city. She was going to be famous by the end of her first year— guaranteed. I didn't tell her that the gap in her front teeth or the fact that her left breast was larger than the right would hold her back. How did she think she could ever be discovered when she was so unremarkable?

For me, the summer and the lifetime after loomed ahead, threatening to be hard and uneventful. Just another few months in a long line of months that added up to nothing. Unable to improve what was coming, I felt like I was on the tracks, watching an oncoming train with the placid gaze of a cow. When my father left he took his paycheck and what was left in the bank account. We didn't have the extra money for me to think about leaving town. We were the

definition of dirt poor with the only exception being we didn't own any dirt. Our apartment, moored in a cement wasteland of parking lots, was on the edge of town just far enough away from the corn fields that a kid could almost slip the title of country.

Getting a job at the mill to help with bills took almost no effort. It took even less effort to cancel my enrollment at the community college. I hadn't been excited about going so it didn't bother me to end it before it started. My mother's eyes watered when I told her my plans. She said all of those men at the mill were just like my father, said the work was too dangerous, said I could always try school next year. Despite her concerns on my first day she packed me a lunch and a note saying good luck and be safe, leaving both next to my keys.

The sun wasn't up when I reached the mill, but there were workers rushing around the yard already dirty. At the processing trailer I greeted a man simply titled, Hiring Manager. I was handed papers to sign, and not knowing what they were I put my signature to each one that shuffled across the desk.

"Your foreman is going to be Lowell."

"Okay."

"Don't look for him before noon; bastard will be asleep in the office. Look for Dib, younger guy at bin twelve." I watched the man's bald head bob above his paperwork. There were a few beads of sweat, resting in the creases of his forehead. "You might know him. Went to East High. You went to East High, right?"

"Just graduated, sir."

"Uh-huh." I could see he was doing calculations in his head. "I think he left there about ten years ago. Dib Sullivan?"

"Sorry," I said, shaking my head.

"Doesn't matter. Dib will have the orders for the day. Listen to him. He'll keep you out of trouble; show you what to do. Keep your questions on the lean side and the two of you will be fine." Stretching his plump figure over the desk, he held out a hand and we completed my hiring with a limp, clammy shake.

"Thank you," I said. I dropped his hand and wiped mine off on my jeans.

"Tonight, you'll want to take back that thank you." There was an awkward pause as we looked at each other in the cramped trailer. "If you head out of here and take a left, you'll find bin twelve. Good luck." He eased back into his desk to shuffle more papers.

I took my second good luck of the day and rushed out the door. I wasn't sure what bin twelve looked like or what Dib looked like, but I was going to keep moving until I saw a number twelve or a man that looked like he was named Dib. As I walked, I imagined Annie in New York. She hadn't left yet, but leaving was all she talked about. I tried not to, but all I could see was her striking up a conversation with a man. Not a boy, but a man, who would give her a business card and a line about how stunning she was. How many minutes, hours, days would it take for her to put all her memories of me in a box marked high school and move on?

"You've gone too far. Twelve is back there."

The voice came from behind me. I turned to see a man, older than myself standing in the middle of the path. I didn't recognize him from school or around town or anywhere. Taller than me and stockier, he stood with a casual slouch and crossed arms. The sun was just breaking over

the corn fields, but he had a pair of dark sunglasses covering his eyes and a cigarette in his mouth. Not sure what I expected, but a hung-over cowboy was what I got.

"Sorry," I said. Fumbling, I took my hands out my pockets and extended one to him. "I'm, Ethan." He took my hand and gave it a quick, but firm shake. His hands were rough and seemed triple the size my own. They seemed to match the low, raspy draw of his voice that hinted at southern roots.

"Let's get to it," he said. He turned away without introducing himself. We walked in silence to a small bin with a faded, red twelve painted on the outside. "Twelve," he said, pointing at the number. I felt stupid for having walked right past it. The number was huge.

"Got it," I said.

He turned off the path past the bin to a large open barn. "This is our barn. You'll spend most of your time here."

I looked from Dib to the barn— both dusty and worn. My mother told me the mill wasn't what she wanted for me, but it would be a stable choice. Everyone had to eat so everyone needed corn. I could raise a family on the income from the mill if I was there long enough. She had settled and thought I should too.

"What should I do?" I asked.

"Take the full bags of corn and move them to the pallets outside. Sound fair?"

"Yeah. And when I'm done?"

"You go home. Should take most of the day," he said. Without another word he walked off towards the bin and started up the auger to make new bags for me to move.

I pushed, pulled, and dragged bags around the barn until lunch. Shirt clinging to my chest with sweat and palms bloody, I headed to my truck to eat. Passing a row of picnic tables

on the way, I noticed Dib sitting at the far end, alone with a book in one hand and a pen in the other. A white bread sandwich, wrapped in wax paper, sat untouched next to him. He still had his sunglasses on and didn't look up as I passed. A few of the other hands snickered as I walked by and scooted in their seats so there were no spaces left.

Sitting in the bed of my truck, I dangled my feet off the edge and rolled a sweating Coke can between my hands to soothe the blisters. In front of me the corn bobbed back and forth in the heated wind. Our apartment was a few miles past the corn, but from this angle it was almost impossible to image there were paved parking lots or laundry mats lined with of rows and rows of humming machines. My mother would be standing near one of these machines; soiled sheets filling her arms. The commercial laundry, her second job, was the reason her fingers were raw and the reason our apartment stank of chemically manufactured flowers. I let myself lay back in the bed of the truck and looked up at the sky. Blue filled my vision, no clouds to force into recognizable shapes, just blue.

When I got back to the barn, Dib was already there, stashing his book in his locker. I squared my shoulders and walked past him to my remaining bags of corn. Before I gripped the rough edges of the burlap bag I noticed a pair of creased leather gloves sitting on top of the first bag. They were worn and one of the finger tips was missing, but they covered my current blisters and would prevent more. I turned to say thank you, but Dib was out of the barn.

The hiring manager was right; I wasn't rushing to thank him at the end of my first day or any day after that. The work was dirty, painful, and lonely. I tried for a week to thank Dib for

the gloves, make small talk, but he kept to his work— silent. By the end of the second week, I brought headphones with me to push the silence out and keep my mind off the hundred other things I would rather be doing. None of those things involved sanding callouses at night so they wouldn't rip open the next day.

I watched Dib as he worked, my music providing a private sound track to our day, and I studied his routine. There was no change, no variation. His quiet, calculated movements repeated themselves over and over again. The auger spun at the bottom of our small bin and shelled corn spilled into burlap bags all day. The repetition of his actions made me anxious at first, gave me a restless feeling. As the days stacked up behind us I thought Dib's lack of frustration over the monotony was a skill and one that I could learn. But I couldn't. His calm resignation, his lack of fight started to make me angry.

As I fell into my own rhythm of cataloging and scrutinizing Dib's every move, my previous life started to slip away. It was slow at first. Missed trips to the drive-in because I was tired, missed phone calls because I was sleeping or working. When I was able to make it out after work I felt outside of the conversations, left out of inside jokes. They didn't care about the work I was doing or the people I was working with. Annie wanted to talk about acting classes and coffee shops while I prayed for a break in her talking so I could slip away. She made me promise over and over again that I wouldn't forget her, but when I thought about what a memory of her would look like in a few years and all I could picture was the cream color of her thighs.

One by one they left town. I attended the parties, said goodbyes, and made trips to the airport. When Annie left she promised to call as soon as she landed, gave me a hard kiss that left her breathless, and walked away. As she rushed to the gate, her bags weighing her down, I found

myself thinking of Dib. Is this what happened to him? Had he stayed behind while the rest of life rushed away from him or had he wanted to stay?

The week after Annie left I found my anger toward Dib unbearable. I found that it was possible to tell time in coffee breaks and cigarette butts. I took a mental note of every time he wiped his forehead or took a drink of water. He did nothing different in his day, nothing. I feared that if he stood too close to the rusted machinery, he would melt into it, becoming part of the mill.

I sat in my truck, not eating my lunch, just staring out the window. A few bins over, Dib would be eating his lunch in the same spot he did every day, reading in the same book, writing in it with the same pen, eating the same sandwich. My truck felt smaller. I kicked the door open to let more air in, but I could feel my chest constricting. Spilling out of the truck, I leaned against the hood. Hot air filled my lungs and rushed out. There were other workers streaming past me to the tables. They all seemed to be walking close to each other, talking and joking. Not looking at me. I ducked inside the cab of the truck, scooped up my lunch and slammed the door shut. Passing everyone, I walked up to the picnic tables.

Most of the the seats were full save for a few around Dib. He had his book open, a warped copy of *War & Peace*, while he walked a pen over his fingers. I slid into the seat across from him and smacked down my lunch. He didn't look up.

"What'd I do wrong?" I pointed my comment at Dib. He kept his focus on the book. "Did I stack something wrong? Is it possible to stack a bag of corn wrong? Because that's all I do. Every fucking day, I pick shit up and I put it down."

The other workers grew quiet, keeping their heads down, but tilted towards us. Flicking the latch on my lunch pail, I let the lid bounce open onto the table. I pushed the contents around.

Carrots, a sandwich, something sweet that looked like it might have been part of a cake. I pulled out the bag of carrots, the small nubby kind, and stuffed one into my mouth. Dib was still reading, still scribbling; the other men still silent. I bit off another piece of the carrot and spit it across the table at Dib.

The wet nub of carrot bounced in front of him and landed next to his book. With a twitch of his hand the carrot landed in the grass and he was on his feet, rounding the table. I flinched as he grabbed me by the back of my shirt and hauled me up. We were walking across the yard towards bin twelve before I had time to protest or rationalize what I had just done.

"Is this what it takes to get your attention," I said. I could feel my cheeks burning and tried to twist out of his grip, but it was solid.

"Not here," he said. He pushed me in front of him and pointed down the path. We walked past bin twelve to the barn where he motioned for me to sit down on a tipped over bag of corn. "If you have a problem you ask me here, not in front of the other men. Understand?"

"I'm sick of this," I said. I could feel a tremor in my voice, but I kept going. "I'm sick of watching you do the same thing every damn day. I'm sick of sitting in my truck, alone. I'm sick of the guys giving me shit, filling my car with moldy corn cobs."

"Then quit," he said.

"I can't."

I wanted to say more, but the words jammed up in my throat. He turned away and started pacing in front of me. I watched him, kicking dust up as he went. In a way, he reminded me of my father when I had tripped on the carpet and spilled his tobacco. I stayed on the ground, my small, uncoordinated fingers trying to scrape up the fragrant flakes as he stood above me

watching. The flakes stuck to my fingers like the words in my throat now as I picked at the carpet for hours, unable to get them all.

"This is a job," he said. "We're not here to be friends. Just put in your time and go home."

Face hot, I stood up and moved the bag I had been sitting on to the pallet. I felt Dib watching me pace back and forth; picking up bags and setting them down. We finished the day in our normal silence—no change. Stacking my last bag before Dib shut down the bin, I walked out.

When I came in the next morning Dib was sitting in the barn. His feet were kicked out in front of him, his arms crossed, and his head leaned back.

"You're late," he said.

I pulled on my gloves and looked over at him. "I didn't think the corn would mind."

"I was thinking about yesterday and we're going to do things different." When he stood up I noticed the bags that normally accumulated inside the barn were already on the pallet.

"Today, you're going to run the bin."

"Why?"

"Because you're right. All you do is move the corn back and forth. It's time to teach you something. Who knows, maybe you'll be good at it."

The rest of the day went by in a flurry of instructions and frustrated sighs. Dib did his best not to take over when I spilt four bags worth of corn in the dirt, or when I leaned back with confidence and almost got my shirt caught on everything. He kept me moving, showed me each part of the lower bin. The auger which had seemed so mysterious now made sense. As it spun around it created suction in the bin, pulling the shelled corn down. The suction was good, it

was what we wanted, but sometimes, despite the pull of the auger, the corn would get stuck in the bin. Dib explained if that happened someone would have to get in the bin and break up the chunks. He called this walking down the corn. He didn't go into detail. Said if we did our job right we wouldn't have to go into the bins. By the end of the day I saw him smile once even though we had only put out a quarter of the bags that we usually did.

"You'll get better," he said.

"You sure?"

"No, I'm not. But we have time."

I nodded, picking up my stuff and starting for my truck. "Thanks." He didn't respond, but raised his hand as I left the barn.

In the weeks that followed, I fell into his quiet rhythm. The anger I had felt seemed to disappear the more time I spent working with Dib instead of for him. I could respect his calm, calculated gait now as I experienced first-hand how rushed, forced actions wasted time and corn. Half the day I would move the bags while Dib ran the bin and after lunch we would switch. There was small talk, most work related, but after a while, I left my headphones in my locker. The days seemed to move faster and I became more confident. Going into my fourth month at the mill our production was back up to normal and I was starting to breathe again. I stopped eating in my truck, choosing to sit across from Dib. This didn't stop him from reading, jotting down notes from time to time, but I didn't feel like he wanted me gone.

I wrestled the last bag of corn and tossed off my gloves. I could hear Dib shutting down the bin and lingered just inside the barn to avoid the rain which had been coming down in sheets for days.

"Meet you at the bar? I'll buy the first round," I said when he walked in to put his slicker away.

"You're not twenty-one."

"You'll buy the first round then?"

"With your money," he said. He was out of the barn and at his truck, pulling around to pick me up before I could offer to drive.

"I can drive, you know?"

"Not very well. Get in."

The trips to the bar were a recent change in our partnership. Feeling more comfortable with my new life, I ventured into the bar closest to the mill, alone, to test the theory that I looked older than I was. The bartender didn't have me thrown out, but she didn't serve me. I joked with her, complemented her hair— a hideous red dye job —and tried to get other mill workers to vouch for me. None of it worked. So I sat at the bar, getting drunk off the atmosphere. Music cranked out of the jukebox with the twang of steel guitars and southern vocals. I preferred other music, but this seemed fitting as I watched the men and women rotate around the room, looking for a good time.

When Dib walked into the bar, he got a warm greeting from the bartender, a peck on the cheek from the waitress, and a shocked look from me. He tipped his hat to me, throwing a few bills on the counter and retreating to a booth in the corner. With the dim light and the dark brown colors of the bar, Dib seemed to vanish into the booth, his face blocked by his hat. I didn't

bother him, just watched. Much like lunchtime at the mill he pulled out his book and sipped a beer. The night ended with Dib being shooed onto the dance floor, nothing more than a tight opening where a few tables were pushed out of the way, by the redhead behind the bar. He made a show of not wanting to be out there, stamping his boots as he walked, shoulders slumped. But as I watched him sway awkwardly with his arms draped around the woman, her chin resting on his shoulder, I knew he wanted to be out there pressed against her.

I kept my distance for a while before I approached his booth. Similar to the show he made when asked to dance, he resisted my attempts at conversation, but gave in. Now when we walked into the bar we were both greeted the same, both receiving a peck on the cheek from the waitress, my kiss lingering a little longer.

"Two drinks for you tonight, Dib?" By now she knew the second drink was for me. At first Dib tried to hide that he was giving me the drink, but she caught us. We both knew that she didn't care, but she threatened to throw us out if Dib didn't dance with her. I drank and Dib danced.

"Correct," he said. He ran his hand over the bar as we walked towards his booth. Sitting on opposite sides we discussed the day's work, the bag counts for the larger bins, and how little the attention the foreman paid us. When the conversation fell silent, Dib flipped open his book.

"Can I ask you a question?" I said.

"I'm listening."

"What're you writing?"

"Just writing."

"Is the book good?"

"It's a book." He looked up and set his book aside. He had a smile on his face as he reclined in the booth and looked at me. He knew I was going to ask more questions and was just waiting. I looked away and took a sip of my beer. I tried to let a full minute go by before asking my next question, but I only made it thirty seconds.

"Why did you decide to train me?" He laughed a little and rubbed his hands over his face. "You could've just let me sling the bags around. I would've quit."

"You looked like a man ready to drown, someone who needed a change. I gave you the only change I could. Shitty one, but it worked." His smile faded and he looked down at his glass.

When the waitress came by with our drinks she smiled, spilling small drips of the beer as she handed them over. She lingered at the booth asking more questions than even I would have asked. I answered all of them while Dib sat back and watched.

"Are you going to do something about that," he said after she left the table in a flurry. I looked at him confused and he pointed at the waitress.

"I have a girlfriend, remember? A movie star in the making."

"Right, right," he said. He knew it had been weeks since I had talked with Annie. We were only a couple in name and laziness to end it.

After a few beers and a shift change Dib left the table to dance, leaving me by myself. I had never asked about their history, satisfied to make up my own story for them. But while they were swaying on the dance floor; her whispering in his ear and him responding with a rolling laugh, I thought, Dib had gotten it right.

I left that night, having drunk too much, in the car of the waitress. She spent most of the night dancing with other men, but as the last song played through the crackling speakers, she

pulled me onto the dance floor. I danced, hands in her pockets, until the music stopped and then some. Looped around me, her arms held fast when Dib said it was time to go. I let her lead me to her car even though she was older than me and I didn't care for the way she laughed through her nose when she got excited or the way she hung off my shoulder.

As summer ran into fall, I spent more and more time with Dib. A few nights out of the week I would crash on his couch after we closed the bar. I told him I didn't want to wake my mother, which was true, but at the same time finding her asleep in my father's chair at three in the morning was too much for me. I tried to tell her that she needed to move on, he had. She would just smile at me, brush my hair out of my eyes and say she was too old to try again. She had loved and hated my father in the way someone loved honey, but hated bee stings. Now that he was gone my mother, in fits of sobs, would grab my shoulders and make me promise to never be like him. I would nod as her desperate fingers dug into a shirt that was a hand-me-down from my father and wonder if it was possible to keep that promise. It was easier for both of us if I gave her my check and stayed elsewhere.

At the mill we got little rest from the sloppy fall weather. The entire mill, once a dust bowl, was now a mud pit. The corn was becoming a problem, sticking in all the bins. Ours fared better with Dib only having to walk down the corn once. The other workers thought Dib had a secret to keeping our bin running, but he insisted the smaller bins had less trouble. It seemed like every day men were going in the bins to walk down the corn only to get a few bags out before it

gummed up again. I could feel the tension build each time someone went in a bin, but everything was routine.

"Dib, Ethan. I need you guys to head over to six and help out Stan. He's complaining about the corn sticking, again." The foreman stood at the mouth of the barn, shifting on his feet to keep from sinking into the wet ground. This was the second time this week that Stan had complained about the corn and now his two partners were out sick. Dib said it was the rain, the moisture in the air that was causing the problem, but I thought Stan was a mean drunk who needed to retire. That was the real problem.

"We'll head there now," Dib said. He took off his gloves and pulled on a slicker. "Come on, Ethan."

"Yes, sir," I said. I grabbed my own slicker off the wall and followed Dib out of the barn. Boots squelching in the mud we stalked past the water logged foreman towards Stan's bin. "Do you think he even knows what goes on at this mill?"

"Not my place to wonder that," Dib said.

"You could be running this place. The other guys respect you a hell of a lot more than him."

"Thanks, I think." He laughed a little. I tottered on my feet, mud up to my ankles and tried to keep up with him, but he was already a few steps ahead of me.

"I'm serious."

"So am I. I'm not here to run this place. I want to put in my time, collect my check, and be ready to move on when the time comes."

I wanted to ask him what it would take for him to move on, but I knew he wouldn't answer me. He would keep walking; maybe laugh, but he wouldn't really answer me. It took us

longer than it should have to get to six and by the time we did, Stan was hammering on his bin with a wrench.

"Took you guys long enough. I sent the foreman thirty minutes ago," Stan said. He had his back to us, wailing on the bin.

"Take it easy, Stan," Dib said. He reached around Stan and grabbed the wrench out of his hands. Stan glowered at him, but stepped back to move out of his way.

"It's stuck. We're going to have to go in," Stan said.

"Alright, you and I can walk it down while Ethan keeps an eye out."

"Dib, I can get in there with you," I said. I wanted to get in there. I didn't need Stan's approval or respect, but I wanted Dib's. I wanted him to know that I could do this job and I was worth the effort he was putting into me. "Really, I don't mind. Besides, I need to learn how to do this eventually."

"Let him do it Dib, he wants to," Stan said. He looked anxious, shifting on his feet like the foreman. Dib looked between the two of us. I tried to look as eager as I could in the pouring rain.

"Fine, Ethan let's go." He waved me over to the tool shed. "I'm going to take a shovel; you take a pick with you. I'll go in first, you follow. We're going to do this quick and get back out. When we get in there, we'll work in opposite directions, get the big clumps out. Try to keep to the edges of the bin. Okay?"

"Okay."

"Stan, while we're in there, you keep that auger off," Dib said. Stan nodded and Dib pointed a finger at him. Stan held up a hand and made a cross over his heart. Dib moved to the side of the bin and took the steps of the ladder two at a time. I followed behind, my heart racing.

At the top before I could worry about my hands slipping on the rungs or my feet missing a step, I was looking into the open hatch. Dib was inside, working his way to the wall.

The sweet smell of wet corn filled my nose as I dropped down inside the bin. It was humid and hard to walk. I slipped a few times before I got to the wall opposite Dib.

"Jesus, it's hard to walk in here," I said. The sound of my voice fell like molasses, trapped in the thick air.

"I know. Just keep steady. Use the pick on the big clumps."

"Is this normal for the fall?"

"Unfortunately. It's too wet this year. Dry corn doesn't have this much trouble." His face was red as he shoveled the corn; his boots disappearing at the tips. I let my own feet stay buried as I shuffled along, breaking up clump after clump of corn. I was impressed with the size of the bin. The ceiling towered above us, making me feel like just another kernel of corn.

"You know those mechanic tech classes I mentioned?" I said. I didn't look up from my feet, but I could hear him stop moving.

"Yeah."

"Looked into them more and I don't think I'm going to do it."

"Why the hell not?"

"I don't think they'd do me any good. Expensive too."

"The point is not missing out. Not taking these classes would be missing out, Ethan."

"I'm not sure what I'd be missing," I said.

"That's just it. You don't know what you'd be missing. Could be something amazing or it could be horrible. Either way it's only a year."

"Forget I said anything." My face felt hot and I could feel sweat trickling down my back. I thought he was going to agree with me, tell me it was a waste of time. "Let's just get this done."

"Fine. Just don't do make up your mind yet. You still have a few weeks to register."

Turning tactics back on him, I stayed silent and started walking again. With each new step the corn rushed in around my feet, pulling them down. My breath came in short bursts and I stopped, bending over to take a break. I could hear Dib muttering across from me. Pounding a fist at the metal wall, Dib yelled for Stan. I looked over to see that he had slid towards the middle of the bin.

"What're you doing?"

"The corn shifted. Stan must be doing something out there."

I listened for a minute. "It doesn't sound like the auger is on."

"No, I think he opened up one of the lower doors. Shit." The corn was rushing around his legs as he tried to pull them out. Dib had only mentioned the lower doors once in passing. Said if the auger ever broke, we could open them up and get the same suction. Made a horrible mess, but it would work.

"Hold on, I'm coming." I dropped my pick and stared towards him.

"No," he said. His voice was strained and tight. "Just stay over there. Keep close to the wall." He yelled out for Stan again; his voice taking on the tinny sound of panic. Keeping my position on the wall, I reached a hand out for him. He leaned towards it, but we were oceans apart.

"This is stupid, I'm coming over there."

"Ethan, listen to me and stay the fuck over there." The corn was up to his knees now, locking his lower body in place.

"What do you want me to do?"

"I want you to get to the ladder and get out. Tell Stan to stop whatever he is doing and throw down the harnesses."

Steadying myself, I scooted along the wall. Each step was harder than the next; my feet sinking a little deeper as I moved. I called out for Stan, pounding my fist against the wall. I looked back at Dib. He was waist deep in the corn, using both of his hands to bale the corn away from his body. Slipping as I trudged along, I lost my balance, sliding closer to Dib. I could feel the small kernels rushing in my boots and filling the gap between the leather and my calves. I called out to Stan over and over again. My voice was ragged and hoarse. I started digging with my hands, mirroring Dib's now stalled efforts. I had sunk up to my hips in the corn, but Dib was in up to his chest. I could see that his breath was coming in quick hitching gasps.

"Dib, slow your breathing." He shook his head, his arms bent at a wretched angle, grasping at the corn. It was happening too fast now. He was sinking lower into the sticking corn. His eyes brimming with tears blinked over and over again. I screamed for Stan again and imagined I could hear voices outside, feet on the steps.

"Ethan, I'm not ready. I'm not ready."

"You're not going to die. I can hear them, they're coming." I let the corn pull me down closer to Dib. In up to my waist, I could reach him now. I stopped digging around myself and tried to brush the corn away from his face. His chin was tilted up, mouth gasping for air. I took shallow breaths, trying to keep the corn from stealing the space around my chest. Dib was reciting a prayer I didn't know, over and over again. God is near, God is watching over me. God

is near, God is watching over me. God is near. I tried harder to move the corn away from his face; I just had to keep him from going under. I was certain I could hear voices, shouting.

"It's okay. I can hear Stan."

"Ethan, I can't. I can't breathe." He recited another line of the prayer and closed his mouth. Corn rushed in, resting just below his nose. I called to the voices on the outside, begged them to move faster. Do something, anything. I couldn't move my hands fast enough and the corn rushed over Dib's head, leaving his hands thrashing above the corn. There were sirens outside and voices above me as I watched Dib's hands slow and stop.

The rescue was slow and panicked. There were other bodies in the corn; men I recognized from the mill, but never talked to, tried to pull me from the corn, but the pressure was too great. They pushed a bucket with the bottom cut out over my head to stop the corn from covering my face and dug and dug and dug. I could hear cutting outside, yelling and the echo of Dib's voice in my head, pleading for his life. It took hours before they were able to pull me from the corn. I sat silent, suspended in the corn, knowing that Dib was a few feet away from me, dead.

It was dark by the time they hauled me out and laid me on the soggy grass. My mother was there, frantic to wipe me clean as my lungs expanded for the first time in hours. I could feel blood rushing through my body, making my limbs tingle and burn. Another two hours, when the tiny dimples of the corn stippling my body faded, they placed Dib's body on a stretcher. I watched from the grass as they loaded him into the ambulance, refusing the requests of my mother to leave. As they drove him away, I found myself whispering Dib's prayer. I repeated the words wishing I knew the rest. Had Dib known the rest of prayer or could he only remember those few words?

I walked to the car with my mother; flood lights set up by the rescue crew lighting our way. There were still workers from our shift, hanging around in the yard as I moved to my truck. They kept their distance, a healthy bubble of space between me and them, but they lingered. Stan was standing by my truck with his hands twisting in front of him.

"Ethan, I'm sorry." His restless feet created a sucking sound in the mud. "I should've gotten the harnesses before you guys went in. I just didn't think it was that bad in there."

I pushed past him and fumbled with the handle of the door.

"I didn't know that was your first time in the bins. Thought Dib would've sent you in before, told you what to do," he said. His words were quick, pleading as if more words would make everything better. "Ethan? You gotta know I didn't turn the auger back on. It was the foreman. Thought things were moving too slow."

I got in my truck, pulled out of the lot, and left Stan and my mother standing in the mud.

For weeks I slept on the couch at my mother's and tried to shake the feeling that I had done something wrong. I knew the foreman had created the problem, but what if I could have done something different? I could have bailed faster or made it to the ladder to get the harnesses. People came to visit me, offer condolences. Annie came to visit. She was on break and wanted to take my mind off of things. Her concern was genuine, but I didn't want it. I told her that I had cheated. I told her it was right after she left, trying to hurt her even though I knew we had drifted apart well before that. She left my mother's apartment in tears and I didn't see her after that. After the holidays ended, after everyone left, I found myself retreating to the quiet of bin twelve.

Everyone at the mill kept their distance as if Dib's death would rub off on them or my presence would cause more accidents. I worked our bin alone. The new foreman, management had fired Lowell the night of the accident, promised to get me a helper just as soon as he could. I kept silent and kept working.

The day I returned, I forced my way into Dib's locker and put his belongings into a box that didn't have a recipient. There were extra clothes, cigarettes, a few spare parts, and his book. I flipped through the pages, running my fingers over the small, neat notes written in the margins. Over lunch I tried to read the book, but I got lost in the close packed words. I let my attention slide to Dib's notes. I had expected notes about the book, but instead I found that at some point he had given up on finishing the book and used the pages as a journal. Some of the notes were just a list of what had happened in a day or week, but others were beautiful and haunting. His first kiss, a sketch of a woman I had never seen. Some of the later notes were about me. He had had his doubts. Thought I should quit, thought I wasn't right for the job. He even devoted a few pages to my carrot spitting anger. In these pages, I found a Dib that wasn't quiet or calm. In these notes, I found a Dib who was conflicted with the choices he had made and the life that he was stuck in. I closed the book and put it in the box with his other belongings.

Dib's death followed me as I worked the auger and closed bags of corn. Dib's death sat with me at lunch, looking over my shoulder as I read his notes. A few times I got in my truck at lunch, driving away from the mill to get away from the pressure. Truck tires rolling over barren back roads, pushing closer to the city limits. Each time I stopped myself just short. I couldn't find my reason for leaving; Dib's death wasn't enough and I couldn't put my finger on the one thing that could push me over the line. I never found out what it would have taken for Dib to move on, but I found myself searching his book for that reason. I never found it. That month I

moved out of my mother's apartment into a place that was closer to the mill. I had received a check from the management at the mill, a small part of a small settlement after Dib's death. I put my time in at the mill, collected my paycheck, and hoped I was ready to move on when the time came.

A Casting

Celli kicked her feet out of bed. They dangled over the edge, only her big toes resting on the floor boards. She knew the first three steps would be quiet. The last five steps over water warped wood would be loud no matter how well she placed her weight. Slowly, letting the wood rub together as she eased her weight down, she headed for the door. There was no stopping the noise; she just had to manage it. Down the hall the pilot light of the furnace whooshed on giving her a moment. Just a moment of added noise was all she needed to get out of the room. There was a rustle from her parents' room, but they didn't wake up.

High on her toes, she walked down the hall. Quick up to her parents' room, slow, slow, then fast to her brother's room. He had seen her at the pond the day before, pushing the slushy ice with a stick. She told him she was waiting for it to freeze then she was going out. It was going to be like a science experiment, testing the ice. Her grandfather had done it. Her father had wanted to do it. She knew that she had to do it, to carry on. He begged her to wake him when she went. She made him promise not to tell their parents. Made him spit into his hand and shake on it. Two years younger than her twelve, he wanted to be where she was, do what she did. He wanted to be her. If she did something, he did it too. If she didn't like something, he hated it more. She hated him most days, but she could use him. If something went wrong. If they got caught, she could blame it on him and he would take it just because.

"Henry, wake up." Her head, leaning in his open door scream whispering. "Henry."

A groan was all she needed to hear before she was down the hall and into the mudroom. Each window she passed was the same view— white, stacked on top of white. She pulled snow pants on, letting her nightgown hang over the puffy legs. They were pink. She had wanted any

other color, even Henry's red, but she got pink. Her mother had picked pink, appropriate for a girl. Her coat, boots and gloves with the fingers cut off were on before Henry walked into the room.

"Hurry up," she said. She didn't want to miss the half-light, the dim in-between hour when the night and the day danced. Their father called this kind of light a casting. He swore that if you stood in the middle of the west field, head pointed towards the sky, the light would cast a spell on you. Even though their mother laughed and said he was just messing with them. Celli knew she was too old to believe the story, the magic of it. Even though she was worried about the ice, if it was thick enough, if she would be able to make a hole, she liked the idea of it, of something out of her control being a part of it. And if it was ever going to happen, it would be when the farm was covered in a new snow.

She wanted the quiet too. To twirl in the muted world, to listen to the snow crunching under her feet made her feel alive. But wait would have to wait, for Henry. Her fingertips prickled on the door knob.

"Let me get my shoes," he said. He yawned and stretched his arms to the ceiling. His pajama pants were too big and hung at the hips, pulled tight with a homemade belt of butchers twine. She tapped her fingers on the frost collecting on the windows. She drew little hearts with arrows and pony heads. Henry moved too slow, tying and retying his shoes. She rolled her eyes.

"I'm going out to the barn," she said.

"Why?"

"I need to grab something. It's a surprise."

"A surprise. What is it?"

She let out an exhausted sigh. "I can't tell you. That's what a surprise is."

"Oh."

"I'll meet you at the pond."

She was out the door before he could respond. The snow almost reached to the top of her boots as she leapt her way to the barn. The snow didn't crunch like she wanted; instead made a soft packing sound that reminded her of the muffled squeak of a door. The color was right though. A hundred different shades of white and gray pressed in layers, crowding together for space in her snow globe. She wanted to lie in it, to make a home in it, to shake it up and break everything inside.

The barn was still. She only opened the door a foot and pushed in. Any further than a foot and it would wake the dogs and chickens and the horses and her parents. Just a foot was enough. She went past the feed stall, past her pony with the long mane, past Henry's lop-eared pony that tried to bite anyone who gave it the chance, to the tool bench. Her father called the bench out of bounds for them, but she didn't think any of his reasons were valid. She was old enough to hold nails for him when they fixed fences, old enough to watch her brother when they were out. This had to mean that she was old enough to borrow a tool when she needed.

Without hesitation and without turning on the small desk lamp, sitting next to the jar of nails, she grabbed both of her father's hatchets. Their light weight, wood handles fit in the palm of her hand the same as yesterday when the pond wasn't ready. She had wanted the axes her father used for chopping firewood, but they were too big. If they were too big for her to throw around, Henry wouldn't be able to even lift them. He had ropy, weak arms that he flexed in the mirror when he thought no one was watching.

Outside Celli could hear the side door of the house open and bang shut. Her face flushed as she stood close to the door with the hatchets in hand. Keeping her body behind the door, she looked out expecting to see her father headed towards the barn. Instead, she could see Henry kicking his way to the pond. His hands were shoved deep into the pockets of his bright red, flannel jack and he was attacking the snow out of his way with yellow snow boots. Huge waves of snow sprayed out in front of them then crashed down. She wanted calm. She wanted to blend in with the snow, not stick out like a blood blister. She hitched up her coat and slipped the hatchets into the waist band of her snow pants and left the barn.

She used Henry's foot prints to get to the pond faster. He was stomping around the edge of the ice when she got there, making a slick patch to stand on.

"What're you doing?"

"Making a launch pad," he said.

"You're too loud. Be quiet."

"Why? No one is out there."

"And I want to keep it that way," she said.

She tossed a few clumps of snow onto the ice, testing it. It seemed solid to her. Maybe not as solid as last winter or the winter before, but it was close. The two of them stood on the edge of the pond. Henry said something, but it was too low and the dull of the falling snow caught his voice and shoved it across the pond. His face was blank and calm as he looked over the ice. It was too early for the sun that brought smiles and laughter. The only light was the cool reflection, bouncing off the snow to their faces. It was eerie, and still, and beautiful.

"Let's go," she said.

"Ok," he said.

Neither of them moved. Feet fixed in the deep tunnels made by their boots, they shared a silent dare. One of them had to take the first step onto the pond. One of them had to be more brave than the other.

Celli gave Henry a stiff shove.

A teeter, a gasp, a pin wheeling of arms, but he didn't move forward.

Celli laughed. It was a shrill, rushed laugh. Henry tried to match her it, but his was timid. She wondered if he was scared, if he would be able to follow her and from a place she was only starting to know, she felt happy that he was scared and that she wasn't really. Maybe it would just be her on the ice with him watching from the shore. This gave her enough courage to move one foot onto the ice. Then two and before she could take them back, she was standing further from the shore than she was close. Sliding across the ice until she was close to the middle. The middle was where their parents didn't want them to be. The middle was ten feet further than where their parents wanted them to be. Celli relaxed on the ice, spinning around on the balls of her feet.

"Come on Henry. It's fine."

"Is the ice thick enough?" He had his bare hands cupped over his mouth.

"Sure," she said. She lifted one foot then the other, letting them smack down. The ice moaned, but didn't crack.

"Dad said the ice wasn't thick enough. Are you sure it's thick enough?"

"God, Henry. Would I be out here if it wasn't?"

"Okay, okay."

He took small steps. Celli could hear the sucking sound the ice made when his weight shifted. Just at the edges of the pond where there was thin gap between the dead grass and the

water. Henry didn't hear it and kept walking. His legs were spread wide, his hands reaching for hers. In a slide more graceful than she intended, Celli closed the distance between them and grabbed his hands.

Locked together, Celli moved him across the ice. Step by shuffling step, she moved them back to the center of the pond. He kept tension in their grip, pulled back on her hands making it hard, but she dragged him out. He trusted her when she said the peppers in the garden weren't hot. When she broke her arm jumping off the swing set she got him to jump off too, saying having a broken arm was fun. He jumped and broke his wrist. He trusted her now and she still didn't know why.

"Want to spin?"

"No, no," he said. The color of his face blended with the snow except for red blotches on his cheeks. White and pale and a bit blurry in front of her.

"Just hold on."

Keeping one heel pinned on the slushy surface, Celli started to rotate. His face was frozen in front of her—terrified. Numb fingers gripped to numb fingers, she spun them. Eyes closed and face turned up to the snow, she spun them faster and faster until his shouting was too loud and her fingers couldn't grip.

Celli let go and Henry spun out across the pond toward the shore. It was almost dawn. The sky a shade lighter than ink let her see his chapped face and nothing else. When he stopped moving, he stayed flat on his belly. His head was on his arms, she couldn't see his face for the coat and the snow. He didn't move. She didn't move. Just held her breath and waited to see him breathing. He did. A big gasp, but he didn't lift his head. It was a relief. She didn't want him to lift his head. She didn't want to see the look on his face. It was sure to be a mix between

betrayal and fear. Just as quick as the relief so was her anger. Why did he always have to be with her? She never wanted to take him with her, not really. What she really wanted was to be left alone. Not just this morning on the ice, but all the time. Free of his constant shadowing and questions. The dare of a story was told only to her, not Henry. He didn't even know what they were going to do.

"Are you crying?"

"No," he said.

"You sure?"

"Yes," he said. His face was still buried and his shoulders were hitching up and down.

"Fine, then get up. I want to try something."

"What?"

She could see half of his face. It was pink and wet. There were slicks of snot and tears under his nose and on his lips. He ran a red sleeve over his face and sniffed.

"Come on. Get up."

He nodded and stood up. His feet slipped around, his balance wavered, but he stood up. Even through the fast falling snow she could see that he couldn't stop his erratic breathing. He was trying to slow it, trying to hide that he had been crying, but he couldn't. Celli laughed and spun and laughed and spun, trying to catch snow on her gloves. She could hear Henry laughing too. Tentative at first, but louder the faster she spun. This time she fell, the two small hatchets landed on the ice. The solid thump of metal on the ice was sobering and terrible. The sound dried up their laughter.

Henry took a reflexive step towards the shore. His hands were outstretched and shaking. Celli held one of the hatchets out to him. "Take it."

"I don't want it."

"Take it," she said firmly.

"No," he said. He had taken another step backward.

"Baby."

"I don't care. I'm going inside."

"I don't care either. Go inside. Tell Mom and Dad."

"Are you coming with me?"

"No, I'm going to do this." Half walking, half skating she made it further and further out.

She didn't need to get further, but felt like she had to make up for the distance that Henry had given up.

"What're you going to do?"

"I'm going to cut a hole in the ice."

"Why?"

"It's a game, Henry. Sometime, I like to have fun."

"I like to have fun too," he said.

"I don't think so."

"What do I have to do?"

She waited on the ice, hatch in her hand. The tips of her fingers, naked in the cold snow, gripped the wooden handle. She could hear him walking up behind her. The snow on the ice crunched like she wanted.

"Take the hatchet. We will both chop at the ice at the same time. Whoever gets through first, wins."

"That's it?"

"That's it. I bet you win too." She couldn't help, but egg him on.

Henry took the hatchet from her hand. It looked huge compared to his hands like the axe looked in hers. For a moment she felt the chill in the air. The snow had stopped and the sky was clearing up. Their parents would be up soon. They would be awake, yelling for them to come in the house.

"When do we start?" he asked.

"On the count of ten," she said.

"That's too long."

"Okay, the count of five."

"Yes," he said.

Celli held her hatchet over her head and looked over at Henry. He was standing a few feet away from her, his hatchet also above his head. It wobbled and dipped, coming too close to his head. The weight was too much for him, but he held it there, his knuckles white then red with tension.

"Count, Celli. Count," he said. He was losing his nerve; she could hear it in his voice.

"One, two, three, four, five."

The numbers came out fast and they started chopping at the ice. Snow and chips of ice flew around them. Each one creating the white for their own snow globe. Celli could hear the blade on the ice, her breath in sharp pulls, the ice under her feet, her breath in sharp pulls. Rough and fast repeated over and over again.

"Are you through yet? I don't think I'm even close," she said.

"Not yet, but I'm close," he said.

Celli stopped to watch him. Huge chips of ice were showering down around him and his hatchet. He had a deep focused look that made him seem older. His lips were pulled to one side in a half grin and his blue eyes seemed bluer.

"Hit it harder, Henry. You're almost through. Harder."

She was almost screaming. She didn't care if their parents heard them. Didn't care if she didn't break through the ice first. Harder, she just wanted him to hit it harder.

"You have it. Almost there."

"I think I can see water, Celli," he said.

The hatchet landed on the ice with a wet, sucking sound and then he was gone. He was standing a few feet away from her one moment and in the next he and the hatchet were in the water. Under the ice, slashing in the water, Celli didn't know. The world faltered in its rotation. She could feel the quiet of the pond, the ripples in the water. There was less air on the farm or the same amount, but was thicker now.

A gasp.

A gurgling, drenched gasp came from the gash where Henry had disappeared. Celli dropped to her knees and skimmed over the ice until she was at the hole. He was there. He was thrashing. Kicking his legs and trying to hold onto the edges of the ice. There was a cover of icy, blue fear on this face that made her plunge her hands into the water. Her hands stiffened around the collar of his jacket and she hauled. She hauled and pulled and scrambled until he was off the ice and on his landing pad. His body was rigid, cold, but alive.

They both lay on the shore, wet and heaving. All Celli watched the new snow fall above them mixed with the full morning light. They had missed the casting while the hatchets were in

the ice, while Henry was in the ice. Her heart raged in her chest refusing to slow. Henry was shivering next to her, his small fingers holding tight to her hand.

"I'm sorry, Celli."

"Don't be," she said.

"I ruined it."

"You didn't ruin anything."

"Are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure."

She held onto his hand a little tighter. He went to get up, but she kept hold of his hand. She didn't want to let go of it. She just didn't want to let go.

Standing at the End

Arthur's shoulders hunched over his pocket watch as he tried to pry the picture out. He scraped a small metal nail file over the notch that should have released the plastic cover. For the hundredth time he lined it up, but his fingers slipped before the picture came free. He wanted to put in a picture of Charlotte and himself, from the 1965 Fall Fair, but that damn notch was too small.

"Shit," he said. The file skated across the cover, jumped out of his hands, and onto the carpeted floor. The phone in his bedroom started to ring over the popping of his knees as he knelt. It was not the first call this evening. He counted the rings, waiting for the answering machine to pick up. There was a soft click of tapes inside the machine then a pause before the recording started.

"Dad, are you there?"

Arthur tried to focus on the voice of his daughter. He could hear her husband in the background, saying that of course her father was there. Where else would he be?

"Please pick up." Her tone was quiet, but there was a hint of frustration Arthur often heard in his own voice. "If you don't pick up, I'll have to keep calling all night."

The call ended with her threat, leaving the apartment silent. He straightened the watch on his desk and shuffled down the hall to his room. Papering the wall around him were posters depicting bigger than life circus tents and trains. Bold reds and whites jumped off the walls as he passed, trying to catch his attention with the spectacle of high flying girls and excited children's faces. If he looked hard enough, he would have been able to see Charlotte and himself in these

posters. The phone started to ring again, but only had a chance to ring twice before he picked it up.

"Dad?"

"Yes, Josephine."

"Why don't you pick up the phone anymore?"

"I've been a little busy these last few months."

"We've all been busy, Dad. If you would just come home this would be easier."

Arthur tried to let her request go, but he couldn't. Since Charlotte died, Josephine had been trying to convince him to move in with her and husband, Richard. She had asked him at the hospital when Charlotte was dying, she asked him again at the funeral, and over the last few months there wasn't a week that didn't go by that she didn't leave a message. The thought of living with them, having his daughter take care of him, made Arthur's stomach turn.

"I'm going to let you go, sweetheart. I need to get ready for a party," he said. He reached into his closet and pulled out one of his clean clown costumes. He examined the stitches of the pants, picking at a few loose threads at the cuffs.

"You sure this is a good idea? Mom and you always did those parties together."

Slipping the costume back onto the rack, Arthur turned towards the bed he hadn't been able to sleep in since Charlotte went to the hospital. "I'm not sure I can do this alone, but it's what I know," he said. Josephine didn't need to know that medical bills had left him with no other choice.

"I'm just worried about you." She started to say something else, but her voice was cut short by the sound of the phone switching hands.

"Arthur, this is Richard. Listen, I'm sorry about what happen with Charlotte. I wish the doctors could have done more."

Arthur thought about his act while Richard talked. He was sick of everyone telling him that they were sorry. He pulled out another costume, this one a bright green silk with large polka-dotted patches. The costume had a large hoop sewn into the waist that worked well to hide his bony hips and wobbled back and forth when he walked.

"Arthur? Are you listening to me?"

"Yes, I'm listening."

"I'm not going to try reasoning with you like Jo does. I think we both know that you can't do this alone."

"Thank you, Richard. I appreciate your concern, but this is really not your business or decision."

"Unfortunately for the both of us, this is my business." Arthur could hear a door closing on the other end of the phone and knew that Richard had moved to another room away from Josephine. "Personally, I don't care what you do." His voice was low and angry.

"You did your job, Richard. We both know you are just doing this for show, so I think we are done talking." Arthur hung up the phone before Richard could respond.

He slipped on his costume. His hands fumbled over the series of buttons on the front of the costume, misaligning them and having to start over. He wanted to be done with getting ready before the phone started to ring again, but rushing with thick fingers wasn't working. Holding a breath, then taking it, he sat down in front of the mirror to apply his makeup, put on his red nose, and make sure that everything was in his pockets that should be. He lingered in front of the mirror, unsure of what the next step should be. He scanned the top of the table, skipping over the

artifacts of Charlotte's makeup. He needed something of hers with him today. Next to her red foam nose was a brilliant blue plastic flower attached to a small coil of clear tubing. It had been years since either of them had used the trick flower, but after filling the reservoir and pinning the flower on, it felt like the right choice.

Arthur grabbed his bag out of the back of the car and hurried up the walk. The front door opened before he reached it.

"You're late."

"I'm sorry, I took a wrong turn. These neighborhoods are like mazes."

"I have twenty cranky children crowded in my living room. I could have had a petting zoo today, but instead my husband insisted we hire you. And you're late."

Arthur felt the urge to argue with the woman, but his thoughts wandered back to the medical bills he had pushed into the trash can last night.

"Point me towards the kids, ma'am."

"I thought there would be to be two of you?" The woman said, looking past Arthur to his car. On the side of the car there was a fading decal of two bright clown faces; one was his, the other was Charlotte's.

"Just me, I'm afraid. I explained this to your husband."

The woman shook her head and held open the door.

"You can leave your stuff in the foyer. The kids are in the living room. Just follow the screeching."

Arthur stepped inside the house and let the woman sweep past him. The climate of these parties always seemed on the verge of hurricane status: hot stifled air, a flurry of preparation, and lots of water. The children, however, had changed over the years. It wasn't like when Charlotte and he were first married, working as clowns on the boardwalk. In those days the kids couldn't wait to be free of their parents to watch their act. Now the kids kept their distance, unimpressed by his tricks. The whole time their parents stood in the background waiting for him to do something wrong; waiting to throw closed the storm shutters.

The living room was littered with children. They ran around the room ignoring or avoiding him, their finger tips and lips stained blue and green from icing. Arthur watched a little boy in the center of the room with the woman who let him in. She was whispering in his ear and pointing at Arthur. The boy scooted a little closer.

"Make me a giraffe," he demanded. His mother frowned at his sharp demand, but said nothing.

Arthur made a spectacle of digging around in his pockets for his balloons as the child watched with sweaty hands and a cake-crusting grimace. Glancing at the child's squint and his chubby cheeks, Arthur decided to be a silent clown for the day. The boy was not impressed with his exaggerated movements; his eyes flicked from Arthur to his mother and back again. Arthur removed a limp yellow balloon, perfect for a giraffe, from his pocket. He stretched out the small piece of latex and held it to his mouth to blow life into the animal.

Only in the last year had Arthur begun to hate the smell and taste of balloons. The white dust that collected in the rolled end of the balloon caused the corners of his mouth to itch and the squelching sound of the wet rubber against his teeth infected his dreams, making him grind his teeth at night. His doctor warned prolonged contact with latex might create an allergy.

Once the balloon was inflated it took Arthur a few twists and flicks of his wrists before a lopsided giraffe was completed for the little boy. This is where Charlotte would have stepped in and lifted the animal from his hands. She would have made it dance and flop around until everyone in the room was laughing. After her display the other children would clamor over one another to get their own balloon. Arthur paused for a moment then held the giraffe out to the boy who stood as far away from him as he could before stretching out his arms, and snatching the animal away.

"Tommy, what do we say to the nice clown?" the mother said, her face still pulled into a tight grimace. She was now standing behind Tommy, pushing him closer to Arthur. Arthur tried not to flinch away. He had grown accustomed to the distance most children kept from him.

"Tommy?"

The mother, in her pink and yellow plaid deck shorts and crisp white blouse, looked horrified as her son threw up birthday cake all over Arthur's pants instead of thanking him. The blue and green icing bled into the fabric, making his leg wet. Tommy started to cry, dragging in ragged breaths of uncontrolled air, and ran from the room. Arthur tried not to focus on the vomit.

"Damn it, Tommy, the carpet." She looked at Arthur and added, "I'm sorry. He's had a long day, I'm sure you understand."

"It happens all the time. Don't think anything of it," Arthur said.

The woman's eyes flicked from Arthur to the hallway her son had just run down as if she was torn between running after her child and an attempt at good manners. Arthur pulled a handkerchief from his pocket that was connected to another and another and another. He untied the first one and started to wipe the vomit off his pants.

Kids did throw up on him, not all the time, but often enough the Arthur always had one costume that needed dry-cleaning. The silk costumes had always been Charlotte's favorites, keeping them clean was an expense that he couldn't afford anymore. It wasn't the kids that bothered him so much; in most cases they were terrified of him. What he minded was the look on all parents' faces that seemed to be searching for a reason to blame him. This mother was no different. Her face was pinched at the center as if someone had wadded her skin up like a piece of paper. He wished that he had an ounce of the charm Charlotte once had. She had a way with children and angry mothers. Even if a child was screaming Charlotte could stop the tears. Or if a mother was having a meltdown she would snuff it out before the day ended in no payment. Charlotte had been magic. Arthur wanted to see her at this party, but all he could see was the thin outline of her body under her white cotton nightgown.

The mother was still facing Arthur, but her eyes were now searching the room for her husband. Before the performance, Arthur had seen the husband and a few other fathers retreat into a small room off the kitchen that smelled of old books and leather. They had not come out since.

"Mister—"

"Hargrie."

"Yes, Mr. Hargrie, please excuse me. I'm going to find my husband so that we can pay you. I think the children have had enough entertainment for today."

She hurried off leaving Arthur to stand in the middle of the living room, done before he had even gotten started. The children pulsed around the room, buzzing in and out. Their voices climbed the floral wallpaper and he wondered if his stomach was going to join Tommy's.

"Mr. Hargrie?"

Arthur turned to the sound of his name, feeling a bit like a dog. The husband was a much younger man than Arthur, somewhere in his mid-thirties— stretched tall with sharp angles.

Arthur thought he looked like the type who ran marathons and watched his diet. Looking at this man made Arthur feel like he was shrinking inside of his oversized clown costume, crumpling into his stooped shoulders. The man waved Arthur over to the study, checkbook in hand.

"I heard what my kid did. Sorry." He wasn't looking at Arthur; he was scribbling in the checkbook. He wasn't sorry.

"It's ok. It happens."

The man looked down at Arthur giving him a sad smile. "I'm sure it does. In your line of work, I bet you get all kinds of stuff spilled on you." He tore the check from the book and held it out. "I added a little extra to get your pants cleaned."

"Thank you, I appreciate it." Arthur took the check from the man's outstretched hand, trying not to make eye contact with him. Arthur knew the man didn't really feel sorry for him and was counting down the seconds until he could forget about the sad old clown and return to his cocoon.

"Did you need me to walk you to the door?"

"No thank you, I can find my way."

"Good, we'll make sure to refer you to our friends," the man said as he slipped back into the room and shut the door.

Another lie. If a child cried, or threw up, or passed out, he would get no referrals. On the way to the door, Arthur passed the kitchen and could overhear the women talking in whispers. They were unhappy with the party, as it clearly couldn't compete with another woman's party last month. The failure was the clown's fault, the other women assured the mother. They were also

unsatisfied with the way the children were performing in school; Tommy was biting again, his mother confessed. The other women made soft clucking sounds to comfort the mother while at the same time shaming her. Arthur hesitated near the threshold of the kitchen, just out of sight, considering listening longer. At one point Arthur had resolved that he was going to write a book about these women, these homes. He had mentioned it once to Charlotte after a party while they shared a bottle of wine. She had laughed at him saying if he wrote the book, she would play one of the mothers in the TV movie. Somehow, they had lost track of that dream.

The clicking of heels spurred Arthur towards the exit. Pulling his bag out the closet, he became aware of a pair of eyes watching him. Arthur spun around to find a little girl watching him, peering around the corner with saucer-sized eyes. He gave the girl an exaggerated smile and tipped the miniaturized bowler hat nestled on his wig in her direction. He sat down on bench in the hall with a heavy sigh and began to take off his clown shoes. He had learned after one disastrous attempt to drive in elongated shoes never to try it again. The girl, peeking around the corner with her bright red hair and pale skin, seemed to have something on her mind, a burning question, but she never managed the courage to ask it. Unable to stop himself, Arthur made a flourish of taking off his shoes. He heaved on the shoe, doubled over and made a show of falling off the bench. The little girl giggled, holding a small hand over her mouth. He got one shoe off and sat it down, shaking a finger at the shoe, throwing it a mock menacing look. He took a deep breath, wiped his forehead, and started prying off the other shoe. This one he allowed to come off easier, but pretended that it was stuck to his hand. He flapped his arms, rolled on the floor, and eventually let the shoe fly free from his grip. The oversized shoe slid across the entry room floor, spinning to a stop in front of the girl. She gave a little squeal and jumped around a corner, gazing out at the shoe.

Arthur pulled on his civilian shoes and walked over to pick up the wayward clown shoe. The little girl withdrew around the corner a bit more, leaving only one eye on him. As Arthur stood up, he plucked a diminutive red plastic flower from his pocket and held it out to the girl. She froze in place; her eyes locked on his. She hesitated so long Arthur was about to put the flower back into his pocket when her petite fingers reached out and took the flower from his hand. She smiled at him, and the flower, and then ran off down the hallway towards the other children. Arthur slumped to the floor, reaching for his bag. He wished that Charlotte could have seen him with the little girl; he had been perfect. The mother who arranged the party walked around the corner, giving Arthur a strange look.

"I thought you had left. Did you need anything else, Mr. Hargrie?"

"No, I'm leaving."

The woman looked down the hall the little girl had used for her retreat. She had a look of mistrust that told Arthur he had overstayed his welcome. He tried to make small talk with the mother as he fiddled with his shoes, but her answers consisted only of yes or no. After minutes stacked together to create eternity, Arthur stood up with his bag in hand. He extended his free hand to the mother who unfolded her crossed arms to give him a limp handshake.

"Thank you, Mr. Hargrie."

Leaving the party, Arthur drove to a diner a few miles from his apartment. Over the years Charlotte and Arthur had made a habit of stopping by the little diner after evening parties. The staff and customers didn't seem to mind the costumes and the food was tolerable. While Charlotte had been in the hospital he continued his visit to the diner to grab a quick meal and buy her some pie that he would smuggle into the hospital.

"Arthur, we haven't seen you in weeks. We thought you were dead," said a young waitress as he walked in.

"Something like that."

"Coffee tonight?"

"Always," he said. "Just give me a second to get cleaned up."

April crinkled up her nose as he walked by. "Did some kid slime you?"

Arthur laughed at her and walked into the bathroom to attempt a quick clean up. When he returned there was a cup of coffee at his seat and two pieces of pie— one in a box. He ran his fingers along the end of the box and pushed it away from him.

"Are you going to finish your story from last time?"

Arthur looked up at the sound of April's voice. "I don't even remember what story I was telling. I have too many."

"It was about your wife, Arthur, how you met her." Before Arthur could respond the bell behind the counter rang, dragging her attention away. "I'll be right back. I need to get this order out," she said.

Arthur knew what he was going to tell her. He was going to tell her of how he was married to a girl he can no longer remember when he first met Charlotte. How when he first saw Charlotte, he was mesmerized by her smile, how he couldn't get enough of her. April would be shocked when he told her that he left his wife and a good job to follow Charlotte across the country before he even knew her. He wouldn't get far enough into the story before he had to go home. April wouldn't get to hear how they fell in love and had a child and left her life with the circus behind to put down roots. He would never be able to convey in one evening the life that he built around a flash of a smile from a girl he met under the big top.

Arthur could hear whispers and muffled laughter behind him. A quick look over his shoulder revealed a table full of teenagers dressed in formal wear. To Arthur they looked like small kids wearing their parents' clothes for the night, trying on different lives. For a moment a glimmer of a younger Charlotte flashed before him. She was laughing at him, trying to feed him pie. He batted her away in this memory, playful, but firm. She took off the red rubber nose she was wearing and ate her pie while periodically sticking her tongue out at him. Arthur turned away from the table of kids and waved April over.

"April, can I get my coffee and pie to go tonight."

"Did they say something to you?"

"Not yet. I'll get out of here before they do."

"I can have the cook talk to them. You don't need to leave."

"It's okay. I need to get out of here anyway."

April gave Arthur a weak shrug and picked up his plate. "I am going to get to hear that story one of these days, right?"

"Next time, I promise."

Arthur threw down enough money to cover the tab and a generous tip. The snickering from the booth of kids picked up volume as Arthur made his exit with his exaggerated waist swinging from purple and green suspenders. These were the same kids that a few years ago would have been scared of him, would have thrown up on him.

"Why so sad, clown?" one of the boys said to Arthur.

Pausing in mid stride, Arthur faced the boy. He was turned in his seat with one arm still slung around the girl next to him. Arthur held his stare.

"I said, why so sad, clown?" The boy was less confident the second time, but didn't look away from Arthur.

Arthur leaned in closer. He was close enough now to see the worry in the boy's eyes. The other kids at the table laughed in short nervous bursts and moved away from the stare down. The girl tucked under the boy's arm slide to the other side of the booth. "Phil, I think you should leave him alone."

Arthur could see the boy wave her away and widened his smile to match his painted one. He could feel the paint around the edges of his crack, feel the layers stretch. He knew the boy wanted to flinch away, but they were both committed to winning. The stare held.

"I'm getting that waitress," the girl said as she tried to get out of her seat.

"Sit down Vicki, I've got this," the boy said.

Using the distraction of the girl, Arthur squeezed the trigger of his squirting flower hidden in his pocket. Cold water splattered onto the boy's face. He let out a shocked cry and jumped back in his seat, spilling soda over the table, making the other kids jump out of the booth.

"What the fuck, old man." The boy was on his feet and standing in Arthur's face.

"Can I offer you a handkerchief?" Arthur said, trying to stifle a laugh. He pulled out his linked hankies and held them out. The boy's fists were clenched at his sides. Arthur could see April duck into the back room to get the manager. Tossing hankies at the boy, Arthur turned and left the diner. He could hear muffled protests from the other patrons, but they don't follow him.

Arthur could feel his heart screaming in his chest and the smile on his face would not relax. With quick steps he crossed the lot to his car, swallowed in the shadows of the parking lot.

Driving away, he could see the bright windows of the diner and the group of kids at the counter, talking to April.

He drove home faster than he ever allowed himself before. The five traffic lights that separated him from the apartment were the only things that slowed his progress. He had the windows rolled down and the cool October air whipped around the car. He could still feel his heart beating like an overwound clock. He wanted nothing more than to lay Charlotte's hand on his chest and to have her feel him so alive.

He pulled into his numbered spot in the parking lot and climbed out of the car. In the back seat he reached for his bag and his hand closed on warm skin. Lying across the back seat, almost hidden under a discarded jacket, was the little girl from the party. Arthur could feel his chest tighten at the sight of her sleepy ruffled hair from under the coat.

"What're you doing back there?" He tried to make his voice smooth, but the words came out in a gruff bark. The girl pulled her head under the coat. "Come out of there right now," he said.

She didn't budge, but he could hear her giggle. In a panic, Arthur shut the car door and leaned against it. His heart was staring to beat wild in his chest again, but instead of feeling exhilarated, he felt like a fool. He wiped a hand across his face. He could feel sweat beading on his forehead and his hand came back covered in white face paint. The parking lot was quiet and there were only a few lights on in the apartment building, but he felt like everyone was watching him to see what his next move would be.

Arthur counted to ten, out loud, then turn around and opened the back door. The little girl had pushed his coat to the floor of the car and scattered a number of tiny deflated balloons

over the back seat. She watched him standing at the door, then held one of the balloons out to him and said, "Please."

Air rushed out of his lung as he took the balloon from her hand. He flipped the little piece of red rubber in his hands like it was a fish and then knelt down so that he could see her better. She was leaning toward Arthur, fixed on the balloon. He twisted it into a small dog and bounced it between his hands before handing it to her. While she squeezed the dog, Arthur reached around her and fastened the seat belt across her waist doing his best not to touch her. He was afraid to touch her, afraid to make things worse.

The drive back to the party house stretched out in front of Arthur. He wanted to get this part over with as fast as possible, but he was afraid to speed now that he knew she was in the car. Before he made the turn on onto her street, if it was even where she lived, he could see the lights of the police cars. His hands gripped the steering wheel as he toyed with the idea of leaving her at the end of the block and driving away. They would ask him questions that would make him feel like he had done something wrong. They were going to assume he had taken her. And when they were done he would feel like the old worn out-clown that everyone thought he was.

Knowing that he couldn't leave her alone, he drove his car through the swirl of blue and red lights until he was at the end of the driveway. As he shut off the car all eyes were on him. The mother who had arranged the party stalked towards his car; her arms swinging wildly. She was screaming something, but Arthur couldn't hear her. In the backseat the little girl was laughing and tossing her balloon dog around. The carefree roll of her laughter climbed over the front seat, causing the corners of Arthur's mouth to twitch. By the time the police subdued the woman on the lawn and motioned for Arthur to get out of the car, he was hitching with laughter, tears rolling down his cheeks.

Fight

Tuck into the fight. Tight fingers, tight face. Your fists don't know when to stop. You don't know when to stop. Taunt the other boys. Bring down the bigger ones. Surprise is the only way. Tangled legs and tangled arms to be pulled apart again and again.

Fight.

Forget the faces— purple, red, blue, and blurred. Faces of friends before the fight. Faces of girls who will linger after the fight is over. They both want the winners. You are confident.

"Bring it home, Nolen," they say.

They pick you over the bigger boys, over the faster boys. First time and untested. On the edges of the crowd. You feel like a winner. First place with a blue ribbon pinned to your shirt. Instead there are more fists. Harder fists than yours. Fists like your father's. You don't know the bigger boy, but he reminds you of your father. Square chin, soft cheeks. You don't go down, swing after swing. You don't know your size— tiny, scrawny.

"You fight like your mom," the boy says.

Stop seeing his face, see your father's face. See the white of rage, of teeth, of bone. No more cheering. Keep wailing when they pull you off. Stop when you can't feel your left wrist— slick with blood. Could be yours, could be his. Wipe your knuckles on the grass— red and green make brown. This boy doesn't look big anymore. He doesn't look like your father anymore.

"Too far," they say.

Back out of the ring. You can feel your wrist now, burning like a live wire. Bent, not broken, but close. Wrap it up with your shirt. You can hide it under long sleeves. You are good

at that. You can hide anything he gives you. Crushed and bruised ribs, fingers, and back. He doesn't try to hide anything. He is proud of that.

The sun recedes. Light is dim, but still there. Dinner is on the table. Calls from front porches dot the evening. The crowd breaks up, leaving you standing alone.

Don't go home. There will be more fighting at home. Fights you can't understand. You can't stay away. Slip in the back to hide the blood. Stay in your room. Shadow box the mirror. In the kitchen the fight churns. Cheer for your mom who doesn't know how to hold her hands. Your father can't hold his punches. You are scared. She will push him back. Keep your door locked, but it won't matter. She will take most of the blows.

"Where's the boy," he says.

"Out," she says.

Pop open the bedroom window after he passes out. Let the wind in, let yourself out. Wish that you could take her with you. One day you will. One day you will steal her in the night, push the car down the road until he can't hear. She'll fight this too, but she'll forgive you. It's for her.

Forget about it for now. Find the ring in the dark, a circle of foot prints and blood. Find the ring still hot from the fights. Tongue the space where a tooth was hours ago. Taste the dirt and the clotted blood. Your father can take teeth one by one, but not forever. Nothing lasts forever. Step inside— circle around and around until your head spins. Time to get ready for the next fight. Time is no object. No one is here to watch.

Keep your swings wild. Watch them extend and extend and extend. You are fighting everyone tonight. Toes stay on your toes. Stay fast, stay cautious. After doesn't matter, stay

focused, stay in the moment as long as you can. You can't fake left, fake right. Try it again and again, and again.

Stop.

You can't get enough air in your lungs. Swing at the wind.

Stop.

Your breaths are as wild as your punches. The light is gone and you can't see the edges of the ring. Rock on your heels. The ring is expanding, doubling over itself to swallow the world. The ring is your world, full of fight and fear. How long can it last— weeks, a year, a night?

Back the next day and the next and the next. Wait for your turn. It doesn't come. They are hesitant to let you fight. You hear that the bigger boy went down on the way home. Wouldn't get up. Still won't get up. He's at the same hospital your mother spent two weeks in. How long will he stay? You remind yourself; he looked like your father. Sounded like him, smelled like him, swung like him. You remind yourself that you are not your father.

Run home. Try to shake the fight, but it follows you. It hoists itself into the window after you. There is someone in the room, waiting in the dark. You don't wait, just swing. Your fists are small and balled against a soft body. The fight is in your fingers and at your feet.

"Nolen, Nolen."

You hear your name. Feel hands around your wrists. Don't stop until you are knocked down. Don't stop until you see your mother's face. It is limp on one side, wild and ringed with black and blue on the other. Both of you black and bruised.

The fight leaves you alone with her. The fight goes so far away you can't see it anymore. She has a bag packed.

"We're leaving tonight."

Long time coming. Leave through the same window to the car at the end of drive. You worry when you should be relieved. Don't start the car; push it until he can't hear.

Take the keys when she offers. Tilt the wheel so you can see. Drive away from the neighborhood. Drive so far that you can't see the ring or how to get back home. So far, so far, so far. Don't talk about it, help her find her fight.

Bounce around between family members for a year. Find grandmas, aunts, cousins and a half brother you didn't know you had. Don't fit in, either of you. Rebound to another town, to an uncle, a second cousin, another aunt. Leave before you get settled. Does he know where you are? Are you going to find him at the door of the next house? Are you going to find the next house?

Start school again, once more. Start it, but never finish. You want to fight. Thought the feeling was gone for good. Thought you had outgrown it. You take any fight with anyone— a cousin, an uncle, teacher, or mother. She wants to leave you. Dare her again and again. Keep time by knocking out more teeth— theirs, yours, it doesn't matter. Your judgment and your smile

have gaps. The fight you need is counties away, years away. You picture him in the kitchen, beer in hand, watching the door.

Try to keep this desire to yourself. Act average— get a job, bag groceries, ask girls out. Give away nothing. Push the date back again, once more. Let a year or two slip by. She catches you trying to leave. She begs, and begs, and begs. You take her fists and her insults— ungrateful, reckless, stupid bastard.

"Nolen, he's your father," she says.

"I know," you say.

"He'll kill you," she says.

"Let him," you say.

She might tell you she still loves him if you give her the chance. She might say that she wants to go back with you. Don't give her the chance. She will never be able to separate love and fear and hate again.

Delay. Mark time on the wall. Dig at the past with your toes. Remember his face, red from yelling, screaming, towering above you. Remember her face when he is through with you, with her. Not enough glue in the world, but you tried. Too young, too weak, you tried— child, son, friend, survivor.

Another year and you are ready. Come home stronger, harder. Home looks the same, but you don't. You look nothing like him— wide face, deep brow. Hold onto small blessings with

tight fingers. Find him in a church basement, not a bar. Unexpected. Unsettling. He is in a circle. Old men make the ring. Stale coffee and compassion on his breath.

You wait at the edge, rock on your heels. Trade the dusty, blood spotted ring for tile floors and folding chairs. He looks at you. You wonder what he sees— child, victim.

"Ghost," he says.

"Son," you say.

He welcomes you into the circle.

You hesitate.

He insists.

Inch your way in past the cigarette smoke and shame. Your father looks comfortable. They receive you with a unified greeting. Your father looks comfortable.

He makes you wait while they finish. You can feel control shifting sides. If you wait too long he will get away. He will bleed together with the other men. He gets more coffee. You touch his shoulder. He flinches. Ask him to come outside.

He hesitates.

You insist.

Let him go first through the church doors. The men a circle. They crowd around and around and around. You have a speech. A speech you memorized on the drive, over the last few years, forever. You know it by heart. Take a swing at him. One swing to test the waters.

He takes the punch. Holds his hands up and backs away.

Move in close. Move in fast.

Swing again. Stagger from the force.

Your breath is wild. His is even and slow.

You want him to fight back. You know he wants to fight back.

"Fight," you say.

You will keep saying it until he gives in, until he fights back. Another jab to his face.

Blood on his nose, on your knuckles.

"It's ok," he says.

No, it's not okay. You were never okay. Fight the memory of nights hidden under beds, crouched in closets, sleeping in emergency rooms— hospital monitors for nightlights. You swing again for your lost childhood, for being forced to grow up. Swing for your mother and her broken face. Swing until you run out of reasons to swing.

He is on the ground. He is looking up at you as you tower and yell. He tries to stay down. Hull him up, keep him in the fight. Forget the other men. Only see him. Don't stop, ever. Keep putting him down and pulling him back up.

"Too far," they say.

Removed before you're done, before the pressure is released. His breathing is shallow, but it's still breath. You want more, but can't have it. You want to take everything from him. Take his new start, his understanding and compassion, take his life. If there is a new family you want that too. Take and take and take until there is nothing left.

Don't go home.

Don't go back to her.

Don't go back to the fight because the fight is gone for good.

Go on hollow. Go on restless. Go on.

I'm Sorry to Hear That

Evelyn gripped the steering wheel as she pulled her father's car into the driveway. It was early afternoon, but the heat of the day and her father's low mumbles had frayed her nerves. The morning had started out on a positive note; he had remembered her name and they shared a quiet ride to his first doctor's appointment of the week. The silence might have seemed maddening, but Evelyn preferred her father's quiet to his rambling and sometimes violent outbursts.

"Judith, those kids are going to wreck my fence," her father said, pointing towards the neighbor's house as she put the car in park.

Evelyn frowned at her father and looked towards the neighbor's house, but it was blocked by the leaning fence her father had built long ago. In the year and half since Evelyn's return home there hadn't been anyone living next door. The windows of the Hatton house—boarded shut—reminded her of a mouth full of dead teeth every time she drove past. Mrs. Hatton had died years ago and her son, Peyton, had sent Mr. Hatton to a nursing home. No one lived next door; there were no for-sale signs, no movement, and no life. "Dad, the Hattons are gone. There's no one left to mess with your fence."

Popping her seat belt off, Evelyn rushed to the other side of the car to help her father out; he was already ripping at his own restraint. "Dad, wait," Evelyn said as she pulled his door open, the metal of the hinges grinding. Evelyn hooked her hands under his armpits, hefted him out of the car, and kicked the door shut with her foot. He pushed against her hands fighting to be free. "Dad, let it go," Evelyn said as her father strained towards his fence.

"My fence."

He was panicked. His breath ragged.

"Dad, let me get you inside and then I'll check your fence. Okay?" Her father fell into silent compliance and allowed her to lead him to the house. Evelyn placed him in front of the TV, took off his shoes, and got them both a glass of water. His eyes watched the people on the screen, but she knew he didn't see them. For him life was nothing more than motion, colors, and memories. Satisfied that he was going to stay in one place, Evelyn took her glass and walked outside. Standing at the threshold of the door, Evelyn could hear the squeaking sound of metal twisting out of wood followed by a soft whoosh. The sound was slow at first, singular, but picked up speed and was joined by a second. Frustrated by the disruption of the noise to her day, Evelyn sat her glass down on a small patio table and stalked across the driveway towards the fence.

Muttering as she rounded the boundary between the two houses, Evelyn was shocked to find a rust-pitted truck sitting in the Hatton driveway. How had she missed that when she drove past the house? Out of the corner of her eye, Evelyn caught the movement of two men, not children, removing the plywood sheets from the windows. Evelyn watched as the men tossed the panels of wood piece by piece next to her father's fence until the front of the house was free. The warped stack of wood brought back a flush of images full of bruised faces, stinging lips, and the smell of fresh-cut grass.

The memories, conjured by the workers and their proximity to the fence, continued to spill out of Evelyn's mind the next morning. She rested heavy at the kitchen table that had seemed too large when she was a child. In front of her a wisp of steam rolled off a cup of tea,

but she didn't notice; she was looking out the window above the sink. The sun was just thinking about rising and she could almost make out the shape of the fence that divided her family's property from the neighbor's. There wasn't much space between the houses; just enough real estate to bicker over.

Evelyn remembered a battle being waged over that small strip of grass. She and the neighbor boy, Peyton, named the feud The Battle of the Grass after watching their fathers spit fire at one another over the three-foot area. She hadn't been more than thirteen when they started screaming about something a now-dead dog did or didn't do. Her father had been the accuser—the damn dog had ruined his lawn—so he decided to build fence, a six-foot monstrosity that her father constructed under the disapproving eye of Mr. Hatton, Peyton's father. Evelyn remembered her father's puffing cheeks in the middle of the sticky August heat—the ground was rocky. During the construction, Evelyn's mother had stood at the sink looking out the low window and peeled carrots, so many carrots.

Sitting at her parents' table thirty-five years later, Evelyn could hear her father occupying the other room. His bed creaked under the weight of his tossing. She moved off the chair and walked to the sink, pulling her robe tight over her soft middle. There was a time when her appearance mattered to her, but now she was too far gone. Evelyn rested her hands on the worn edge of the counter and looked out the window. The reflection of the kitchen light battled with the sun, creating a mirror effect on the glass. She could see her eyes—puffy—and her dull hair outlined with stark clarity. Living in her parents' house again had started to change her appearance, she was looking more and more like her mother every day. Evelyn wished her mother hadn't been the first of her parents to die. She had died too fast from cancer, cancer that didn't run in the family. It had been Evelyn's choice to come home and to care for her mother,

but now she was trapped. At first she hoped her father would give up and die just as fast as her mother had. Evelyn had lived her life hearing stories about one spouse dying and the other following suit; those were fairy tales. After a year and a half her father was confused, but still healthy. She wasn't sure what she hated more, his dementia or her lack of power.

“Linda?” Her father called from the bedroom. “Linda?”

Evelyn curled her fingers into a fist, letting her nails bite into the flesh of her palm. She didn't know who Linda was— her mother's name had been Judith—but her father kept calling for this woman. If Evelyn rushed to the room when he was calling for Linda he would glare at her and turn to face the wall.

“Dad, I'll have your breakfast ready in a second.”

Evelyn remained at the window as the sun rose over the fence and the hybrid reflection of her mother and herself faded. She allowed her mind to wander back to the summer of the battle. Evelyn witnessed her first fist fight that summer. The fight had been between her father and Mr. Hatton— it was short and bloody. The mothers had to break up the fight, dish towels waving in the air, hair escaping bobby pins. Evelyn and Peyton watched from a blue and rust swing-set in the middle of the yard as their fathers screamed over a plumb line.

“I bet both of them get drunk tonight,” Peyton said, his eyes squinted against the sun. “I hope he drinks himself to death.” He didn't say anything else during the fight and left in silence when his mother wrestled his father into their house. Peyton had been right; both men did get drunk that night. Evelyn's father had bypassed the beers he usually drank before and during dinner and moved straight for the whiskey he kept above the fridge. After an hour he finished the meal screaming at his wife about how the pot roast was so dry even a dog wouldn't eat it.

Her father screamed a lot when she was a child, slammed doors, but never laid a hand on her or her mother.

That summer had also brought Evelyn's first real kiss. She'd been sitting in her room a few weeks after the fence went up when she saw a ball drop over the fence. It was early evening and Evelyn could hear the dry cicadas screaming even though her closed window. She put down her book, slipped off her bed, and moved to the window to find a soccer ball lying near her window. She unlatched the window and heaved it up, wincing as the metal window ground against the metal sash. Evelyn dangled out of the window, fingers reaching for the ball, when Peyton dropped over the fence. Face hot, Evelyn pulled herself back into the window and leaned casually on the sill.

"Your ball?"

"Yeah," he said, stooping to pick it up. When he straightened, Evelyn could see a stain of purple circling his left eye. At the edges the bruise faded into a muddy mixture of yellow and red that reminded Evelyn of broken egg she had seen near the alley garbage cans.

"That fence is something. Isn't it?" She didn't want to bring up his eye; it was obvious that his father had gotten drunk as predicted. However, since she had seen his father that morning he had not died as hoped.

"Yeah, it's kind of hard to get over it," Peyton said, bouncing the soccer ball from hand to hand. He looked nervous. "What're you doing?"

"Just reading. You?"

"Kicking the ball around." Peyton set the ball down and moved to the window sill, resting his elbows next to hers. He poked his head through the window, looking at the books piled on her bed. "Your room is really clean."

"I know, my mom can't handle a dirty room," Evelyn said as she watched Peyton balance himself on the window sill, his feet hovered a few inches off the ground. Evelyn could hear his mother calling, her voice climbing over the fence. "Late dinner?"

"I guess. I'll see you later." He jumped out of the window and stooped to pick up his ball. As if they were trapped in a slow-moving romantic movie, when he stood up his face was positioned an inch from Evelyn's. She could smell bubble gum on his breath and the sweat drying on his skin. Without asking he lurched forward and smashed his parted lips to hers. One of his teeth split her heat chapped lips. They stood pressed together, Peyton moving his rough lips against Evelyn's, when his mother called again.

The kitchen came back into focus as Evelyn slid eggs out of a skillet and onto her father's plate. Her fingers probed her lip where it had split that summer night. The kiss, the split, and the boy had long since moved away. After weeks of wondering where he had gone, Evelyn found out that Peyton's mother had packed them up to live with a relative two counties away. Evelyn overheard her mother talking about Mrs. Hatton to some of the other mothers; they described her as smart and brave. Even now as Evelyn relived this memory she could feel her cheeks turning pink with frustration. She hadn't thought that Mrs. Hatton was brave, but cruel for taking her friend away.

"Linda?" her father called again.

"Dad, I'm coming." Her voice was pinched, rough. Evelyn threw a few pieces of toast next to the eggs, grabbed his orange juice, and walked down the hall towards the room that had terrified her as a child. Like a lot of kids she knew, she had heard yelling from the other side of her parents' door, but it was the silence that had made her stomach churn. The silence that

covered her parents' room in the hours after the screaming, leaked out the door, and ran into the cracks of their life.

"Dad, I'm coming in now. Are you decent?" Silence. Evelyn balanced the food and juice on one arm and opened the door. The air—pent-up from a night of her father twisting and turning—rushed out to greet her. It smelled of hospitals and anger. "I brought you some eggs. Do you want me to help you sit up?"

"Linda?"

"No, Dad, it's Evelyn, your daughter."

He rolled over to look at her, but his facial muscles—briefly pulled into a smile—fell when he made eye contact. "Judith. Get out of here." He rolled back towards the wall.

"Dad, I'm not Mom. I'm Evelyn, your daughter." She emphasized the last few words through gritted teeth and held onto the plate like a life raft. "Will you please sit up? You need to eat something."

"Dammit, Judith, I said get out." He waved his arms at her weakly, but his voice was sharp.

Evelyn stepped into the room that had once been off limits to her and crossed it in long, heavy strides. She sat the breakfast down on his dresser and crouched to look into his eyes.

"Dad, I'm Evelyn."

"Judith, if you keep at it, you aren't going to like what you get."

Evelyn stood up and crossed her arms. "What's going on, Richard?" It felt strange to call her father by his real name, but she couldn't think of another way to get him talking. If he was going to keep living and she was going to stay in the house, she needed to force this conversation. "Who's Linda, Richard? Someone you knew before Mom?"

"No one."

"Richard, just tell me." Evelyn kept her eyes trained on her father's face. His eyes were darting around the room, never stopping on hers. The paper skin around his eyes was delicate and dotted with small brown patches; it made him look older— frail. His hands knotted into fists. "Just tell me." Evelyn tried not to let her mind wonder about this woman, but she couldn't help it. She created false pictures of Linda in her mind, but they all seemed to fade back to an image of her mother defeated, lying in a hospital bed. Evelyn stayed by her mother's side when her father couldn't, letting her mother's tiny hands grip hers as she heaved for breath. Her mother made her promise to take care of her father; she made her promise to forgive him. Her mother talked and Evelyn listened as her mother tried to convince her that her father was a good man; he had tried his best. Never once had her mother mentioned a Linda.

Evelyn glared at her father as his eyes pinched closed and his jaw locked shut. As his disease progressed these frozen states seemed to be his defense mechanism for anything he didn't like. She half expected him to stick out his tongue and make raspberry sounds, but he stayed frozen in a grotesque child's defiance. Knowing that he wouldn't revive until she left the room, Evelyn stood up, moved the plate of food from the dresser to his nightstand, and left.

Lingering outside of the door, Evelyn took in a sharp breath of air. She felt as if she had been holding her breath the whole time she was in there. The air around her wasn't fresh, it still held the stubborn stench of old, but it was nothing compared to her father's room. She waited until she could hear the slow scraping of silverware against the plate before she went back to the kitchen to look over the day's schedule. There was one doctor's appointment she had to force her father to at noon, but most of the day was hers.

Holding her father's schedule in one hand— the itinerary jumping off the page in a mess of bright highlighter marks —she swapped the tea for black coffee with a healthy helping of whiskey. It was a small comfort that some things hadn't changed; her father still kept his whiskey in the top cabinet and they still couldn't talk to one another. The longer she stayed at the house, the more she felt the need to add something to her coffee, to her life.

Evelyn seated herself at the table and sipped the coffee. The schedule lay next to her hand, but her eyes were fixed on the graying fence outside. The sun had reached the top of the fence, giving the damaged slats a warm glow. As she focused on one board broken off a few inches from the top, she noticed a head bobbing past the gap. Evelyn straightened in her seat, setting the coffee cup down.

She wasn't ready for a repeat of her father's panic from the day before; it was too early, too soon. Another head bobbed past the broken slat, this time followed by the clatter of falling wood. Evelyn slid the door open and stepped onto the cool cement of the patio. She hesitated near the door, her hands still curled around the handle when she saw a third head go past and heard a power tool growl to life. From her position on the patio she could hear the voices of two men speaking Spanish over the rumble of the power tool and another voice. The third voice was familiar— deep, but familiar. Evelyn took a step towards the fence with the intent to tell the workers to keep it down long enough to get her father out of the house, but the slamming of a door behind her muscled through the noise and broke her resolve. Evelyn turned from the fence and went back inside to find her father.

The rest of the day swam around Evelyn in a series of dreary and frustrating events. Her father had been a terror to get ready, raving about his fence and accidentally socking her in the jaw while she tried to wrestle him into his shirt. Evelyn staggered away when his fist connected with her face, stunned. He looked confused, almost ashamed. He sat motionless for the rest of his dressing; he even got into the car without causing any undue stress.

At the doctor's office Evelyn sat in the waiting room, flipping through two-year-old magazines as her father wandered around the room. While they waited an hour and a half to see the doctor, her father's sluggish mood wore off and Evelyn had to force him to sit down in a chair furthest away from the annoyed patients. Another thirty minutes and a hundred scowls from the receptionist later, Evelyn and her father were taken into a small room that resembled a holding cell.

The nurse who took her father's blood pressure and weight smiled at him and talked softly as if she was soothing a startled horse. Evelyn watched as her father complied with this nurse and wondered how she did it. He looked so calm, happy. What was it about Evelyn that her father hated so much? When the nurse was finished she led Evelyn's father through the maze of hallways to the exam room and got him seated on the table. As she left the room she smiled at Evelyn and said, "The doctor will be right with you." Evelyn smiled and nodded at the nurse, but what she wanted to do was slap the woman.

Evelyn watched her father stare into the wall—his eyes were glassed over—until she heard the rustle of the doctor picking up the chart tucked in the hanging bin on the outside of the door. She stood up as he walked, in making room for him to sit down.

"Well Evelyn, your father's blood work looks normal. Aside from being a bit malnourished he is doing better than we expected." He looked up at Evelyn, his eyes lingering

on the angry red mark forming on her jaw for a moment then stood to exam her father. "How have his symptoms been progressing? Are you having trouble feeding him?"

"He's eating, but he refuses to eat when I'm in the room."

"That's fine. Just make sure that you are following the diet that we have laid out for him. How are his mood swings? Better than your last visit?"

"They're not bad."

The doctor moved back to his stool and glanced over at her. "Evelyn, these visits are just as important for you as they are for your father's. I need you to be honest with me. How are his mood swings?"

"Honestly, his mood swings are about the same."

"No violent outbursts?"

Evelyn ran a hand over her jaw, then through her hair. "No, no violent outbursts."

"Alright, I'm going to adjust his meds a little. Nothing drastic, just a tweaking." He started scribbling on his prescription pad. "This is for your father," he said tearing off a slip of paper and handing it to her before going back to scribbling. "This is for you. It's an antidepressant. I think it would be helpful. I know what kind of stress these situations can put on a person. Let's just call this prescription self-preservation." He handed her the prescription with a smile and stood up to leave. "Remember, there is no shame in asking for help. If this gets to be too much for you, I would recommend putting him in an assisted care facility."

"I couldn't do that. I promised my mother."

"A lot of people make promises to a dying parent, but it all comes down to you. If you don't think you can handle this-"

Evelyn cut him short. "I can handle this. Please don't assume that you know my situation or my family."

"Well, if you have any questions don't hesitate to give our office a call." He left the room without another word.

Evelyn looked down at the two prescriptions, one for tweaking her father, the other for tweaking her.

The next morning Evelyn started her routine over again. This time she didn't hesitate to start with spiked coffee; she even gave thought to giving a little to her father as she got his food ready. Instead, she put extra in her own cup as she gathered up his food and prepared herself to wake up him up. Much to Evelyn's surprise when she knocked on her father's door, he responded with a grunt.

"Dad?"

"Come in, Judith. We need to talk."

Evelyn took a deep breath and walked into the room. Her father was seated at the end of the bed, looking out at the window at his fence. He was naked from the waist up and Evelyn could see the outline of his ribs and the slumped angle of his shoulders. "Good morning, Dad."

"Judith, this isn't going to be easy, but I think you know this has been a long time coming."

"What is it, Richard?" Evelyn didn't have the energy to convince her father she wasn't her mother.

"I'm leaving you."

The plate in Evelyn's hand shook as she watched her father staring out the window. Evelyn could see the side of his face and it held a look of satisfaction and relief. "Why?"

"I heard you talking with those other women. Everyone heard you talking with them. Do you know how that makes me look?"

"I don't know what you're talking about. What women?"

"Those women from church, Judith. You all think that Hatton woman is so brave, so independent. You want freedom, independence? Fine, you got it. I'm leaving before you can humiliate me like she did."

"What about Evelyn?" She closed her eyes and pinched soft flesh on the inside of her elbow. She didn't want to cry.

"What about her? You wanted her, you keep her."

All the air in Evelyn lungs rushed out in one breath. When had this happened? She couldn't remember a time when her father wasn't around, she couldn't remember this fight.

"Are you leaving because of Linda?" Evelyn could feel tears welling up in her eyes, she wanted out of the room, out of the house.

"Who is Linda?" He looked derailed.

"I don't know, Dad. Is she the reason?" Anger slipped into her words with the tears.

"No, I'm leaving because of you," her father said almost in a whisper.

Evelyn backed out of the room, plate still in hand. She could hear her father talking, but she couldn't make out the words— his voice sounded like it was coming from the bottom of a well. She stumbled down the hall to the kitchen, leaving his plate of food on the counter next to her coffee cup. Brushing the curtains aside, she wrenched open the sliding glass doors and

crumpled onto the patio. Evelyn rested her cheek on the cement letting the cool stone pull the heat from her face. He had ignored her most of his life, giving her the time to build walls around them, but now she was trapped with him and his revelations alone.

Blinded with tears and buried in her own thoughts, Evelyn didn't notice the sound of the fence gate opening or the crunching of brown grass. It wasn't until the shadow of another person fell across her did she look up. Standing above her was a man, his face hidden by the backlighting of the sun, reaching out his hand to her.

"Let me help you up."

With shaking fingers she reached out for his hand and let him lift her to her feet.

"I'm sorry, but do I know you?"

"Evelyn, it's me, Peyton. Are you okay?"

She peered up at him squinting into the sun, his face still in shadows. "What are you doing here?" Her voice wobbled as she spoke, betraying her.

"Hello to you too."

Evelyn blinked at him feeling unsettled. She tugged at her shirt, making sure that it hadn't hiked up while she was on the ground. "I'm sorry for this," Evelyn said motioning to herself. Her eyes felt rough and puffy.

"It's okay. Do you need me to leave? I can leave."

"No," Evelyn responded fast, too fast. "I'm fine, really." She studied his face; it was rounder than she remembered, more weathered. His hair was short and peppered with gray, but still held some of the dark brown from his youth.

"No leaving, check." He smiled at her and put his hands in his pockets. Evelyn didn't think that she had ever seen him smile as a kid.

She looked over her shoulder into the open door of the kitchen. Inside she could hear the gurgle of the coffee pot and the soft ticking of the strained ceiling fan. "Did you want to come in for coffee or something?" Her voice hitched in her throat, but she tried to ignore the sound.

"I would love to. That is, if I'm not intruding?"

"No, I was just dealing with my father. We seem to have issues."

She slipped into the kitchen and stood aside to let him in. She watched him turn in the middle of the kitchen, taking in the outdated curtains with the smiling fruit pattern, the muddy finger-smudged paint on the walls, the worn out floors. She pulled her robe closed before he finished his rotation to face her; she felt embarrassed. He looked out of place, too large, almost like the ceiling had lowered a few feet.

"I don't think I've ever been in your parents' house. It's nice."

"You're being too kind. It's a dump." She poured him a cup of coffee and placed it on the table, motioning for him to sit down. She remained standing.

"Thank you. No really, it looks a lot better than my parents' place. I think a few raccoons were living there until a few days ago. It's a mess."

"So, what have you been doing for the last thirty-five years?"

"The usual life stages, college, working, general life-conquering." He grinned at her and crossed his arms. "How about you? What have you been doing for the last hundred years?"

"Oh, my life." She frowned at the floor and tamped down the urge to start pacing the kitchen. "Life's been more of a holding pattern than a progression. I never got that far from home, never did much of anything after high school." Her own voice felt strange; she had thought those words before, but they sounded so much worse out loud. She straightened herself

up. "I'm taking care of my parents now. Well, I'm taking care of my dad right now. My mother passed away last year."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

Evelyn studied his face; he looked sincere, but she wasn't sure if this was just the polite reflex that everyone has when they learn someone has died or actual concern. "Yeah, I'm sorry too."

"It's hard taking care of parents when they get older. I understand. Those last few months my father was in the nursing home were rough. I heard he smacked a nurse on the ass."

Evelyn gave a short laugh and wondered what it would be like to put her father into a home, to be done with him. She crossed her arms and watched Peyton drink his coffee as her eyes adjusted to him sitting in front of her. It had been so many years since she had thought about him, let alone seen him. "So, what brings you back home?"

He looked away from her running his index finger around the rim of his cup.

"Sorry. You showing up is pretty much the most exciting thing I've seen in weeks."

"I was thinking of fixing up my parents' place. Maybe even move back home for a little bit. Want to help?" He laughed and took a sip of the coffee.

He was joking, but she didn't care. "I wouldn't mind helping. I could think of it as a mini vacation, a very mini vacation." She smiled and picked up her neglected morning coffee cocktail. "It's nice to see you again, Peyton. I never thought I would see you again."

"It's nice to see you too. I actually didn't think you would be here. I thought most of the kids on this street fled when they got the chance."

"You fled a lot sooner." Evelyn watched Peyton as he nursed his coffee and wondered if this is what she needed to spark her life into motion again. She knew it was stupid to put any

significance on a relationship that was nothing more than an inexperienced kiss and a few conversations about shitty parents, but still. She wondered if he even remembered that kiss or that summer; both seemed like a million years away.

She started to ask him if he remembered when she noticed movement behind Peyton in the living room. Standing in the middle of the living room gaping at them was her father. He was swaying near the border of light that separated the kitchen from the living room, hair standing on end.

"Jesus, Dad. What are you doing?" Evelyn rushed over to him, trying to steady his wobbling body. "Let's get you back to your room." Her father threw her arms off his shoulders and moved toward Peyton.

"Who is this man, Judith? What is he doing in my home?"

"Dad, this is Peyton. His family used to live next door. Remember?"

"Judith, you whore. How dare you bring this man into my home?" Evelyn tried to move her father towards his room, but he held fast. "I want that bastard out of my house."

Evelyn looked at Peyton and mouthed, I'm sorry. He nodded at her and stood up to leave, stumbling over the legs of the chair as he turned towards the door.

"That's right; get the fuck out of my house, you bastard."

"Dad, that's enough. We're going back to your room." Evelyn wrenched her father around and gave him a hard shove towards his room. His arms pin-wheeled as his balance faltered and he collapsed to the floor with a soft flopping sound. Evelyn looked down as his body sprawled over the carpet and wanted to scream at him for being a horrible husband to her mother, an uncaring father, for hating her, but she couldn't do it. Instead, she reached down, hooked her hands under his armpits and hefted him up.

"Get your hands off me," he hissed as he lurched away from her towards his room.

Evelyn followed him down the hall and into the bedroom to get settled again. Her father moved to the end of his bed to look out the window at his fence. "I need to fix that fence. Those kids are going to keep climbing over if I don't."

"Dad, I want you to just lay back and relax." He looked over at her with a flash of recognition in his eyes.

"Evelyn?"

"Yes Dad," Evelyn said trying to hide the shock. It had been days since she had said her name. She wanted him to say it again, to never say it again, to stay silent.

"I'm sorry."

"Sorry for what, Dad?" She waited for him to respond, but he just kept looking out the window at his fence.

Evelyn waited a few days to see if Peyton would come by the house again. In the mornings when she drank her coffee she would watch the broken part of the fence to see if he would pass by, but he didn't. After the fifth day of silence from his side of the fence she resolved to go over to his side and see if he was still open for help with cleaning. She made breakfast for her father, who was back to calling her by her mother's name, and slid the plate on his night stand without a word.

She lingered in front the mirror in the hall to fuss over her reflection, then stopped herself. She wasn't looking for this man's approval any more then she was looking for her

father's. Before she could talk herself out of going she marched out the door, down the walk, and past the leaning fence.

As she crossed the line of the fence she noticed two small boys playing with a soccer ball in the backyard. They stopped bouncing the ball off the fence and watched her walk up the path to the front door. Evelyn took a deep breath, smoothed the front of her shirt, and rang the doorbell. She could hear it ringing through the house, bouncing off walls she had never seen. She stepped back from the door when she heard the sound of rushing footsteps. When the door opened a small blond woman moved into the doorway.

"Can I help you?"

"Yes, I'm looking for Peyton," Evelyn said as the woman looked at her, confused.

"He stepped out for second. Can I help you?"

"No, that's ok. I just wanted to ask him something." The woman still looked confused.

"I'm sorry. I'm Evelyn, I live next door."

The woman's face softened and she held out her hand. "I should have introduced myself. I'm Kara, Peyton's wife."

Evelyn held onto the woman's hand, shaking it more than necessary. "I didn't know that Peyton was married. It's nice to meet you."

"It's nice to meet you too. How do you know Peyton?" The woman removed her hand from Evelyn's and crossed her arms. She was smiling, but looked wary.

"Oh, we lived next door to each other for a while when we were kids," Evelyn said as she watched the suspicious look leave the woman's face.

"Really? In this neighborhood?"

"This very one."

"Peyton thought this would be a good neighborhood for the boys to grown up in. He always talks about how nice it was to grow up here."

"It sure was," Evelyn said.

"Did you want me to tell him you stopped by?"

"No, no need." Evelyn back down off the porch onto the walk.

"Well it was nice meeting you. We will have to have a cookout once we get settled."

Evelyn nodded and rushed down the walk, waving at the woman. Once she made it past the safe shadow of the fence, she leaned against it. She couldn't get enough air, or it was too hot. The vibrations of the bouncing ball of the two boys through the fence brought her back to reality. She passed the length of the fence to survey the work that needed done to it. Her father was right; it needed fixed. Stopping to shake a loose board she saw the soccer ball flop over the top of the fence. She stalked over to the ball and scooped it up and started bouncing it between her hands.

"Hey lady, throw it back over," yelled one of the boys.

Evelyn looked down at the ball and her hands and laughed. She could see the two boys watching her through a broken slat near the bottom of the fence. In a moment of familiarity, she stomped over to the old shed where her father kept his tools. She swept open the door and disappeared into the darkness. The two boys watched the door eager for the ball to be returned.

Evelyn emerged with a pair of small hedge clippers. She made a show of holding up the ball first then the clippers so that the boys could see what she was going to do. Then without any hesitation she jammed the clippers into the ball, enjoying the swift exhale of air. Evelyn tossed the deflated ball over the fence and put the clippers back into the shed as the boys yelled in protest and went running to their mother.

This felt right and wrong, it felt like a move her father would have made. For too long he had been a shadow, a force directing from the outside that she fought against. When the air left the ball, so did her fight. Giving in wasn't what she was doing, growing, accepting. Her father would have stabbed the ball, would have built the fence higher. She wouldn't make it any higher, but the fence would keep standing as long as she was still in the house.

For a Short Time

There were two things Stanley Welcome had overlooked in the last year. The first was that people stopped needing mail. Bills, catalogs, love letters and birthday cards with checks and trinkets were becoming extinct and so was he. Even when his mail bag got lighter, he didn't notice. He was older and all bags felt a little heavier. Full, half full, almost empty to the point where his messenger bag crumpled and formed to his thigh when he walked, he didn't notice.

The second thing didn't seem as pressing, more of an annoyance. The second was that Kathy, the temp who had replaced his wife, Eleanor as the sorter at the post office, hated him. He wasn't sure, but he got the feeling she wanted him gone. Not gone like his wife was gone, retired and taking up space at home, but fired, out of the building in a cloud of shame. Were there reasons for her wanting him gone? Sure. From the last bite of Eleanor's retirement cake to the first day Kathy worked the floor, Stan made a point to actively avoid her. When they did have to interact, he wouldn't say much unless it was criticism. By the end of her first month, after two screaming matches, Stan couldn't use the word hate to describe how he felt about her. Hate was just too weak of a word. Loathe was closer, but he wasn't sold on that one either. He didn't try to hide his feelings. He didn't want to.

"Stan, I'm sorting that," Kathy said. She was holding onto the mail bin that he needed.

"I need to get going," he said.

"You can wait. You have to wait," she said.

"I have to wait because of you," he said loud enough for her to hear, but not loud enough to understand.

"What?"

"Nothing, Kathy. Nothing."

"What was it, you said something?" Her hands were hovering over the mail. Not sorting.

"Are you going to finish that today?"

"Maybe not. Maybe I'll give it to someone else."

Stan crossed his arms and watched her face puff up. She clenched her hands around the milk white mail bin, chapped knuckles cracking. He just watched her in silence. If he opened his mouth, even just to exhale a breath, he knew it would end in more screaming at write-ups.

"I could give this to Tim. He's faster on his route, less mistakes," she said.

"Sounds good, Tim could use the experience." He walked away. Turned his back on her and walked out of the building and into his truck. Only when he was inside did he take in a deep breath and let it back out. He was missing mail, but he would do what he could, hit as many houses and stay out of the building as long as he could.

During his lunch break he stayed in his truck. He pulled out a stock of mail for 329 Milbourne and started opening letters. Divorce papers and a water bill. From time to time he had heard the couple yelling at each other, divorce was probably a good solution. 329 was one of the first addresses he ever opened, the first licked seal that he opened.

When he returned at the end of the day, his supervisor, Mr. Calnetta, was waiting. He was standing outside of his office, motioning for Stan to come in.

"Stan, I need to see you in my office," Calnetta said.

"Sir, I have to make it home for dinner. You know Eleanor. She has her routines."

"It won't take long. Come on."

As Stan walked in, Kathy walked out. Her head was dipped down and she was holding a thick envelope. Stan craned his neck after her, but she moved fast, slipping the letter into her coat pocket.

"Come on in," Calnetta said.

"Look, whatever she told you isn't true," Stan said.

"I'm not here to point fingers. No one is."

"She is. I know it."

"Stan, take a seat." Calnetta was pushing himself behind his desk, his ample stomach making it difficult. He had stopped smoking a few months ago and taken up eating to replace it. "I think that you know we all have to pull our weight around here."

"Yes, Sir. I know and I do."

"It has been brought to my attention that you have been coming in on your off days, delivering. I don't know what you were delivering," Calnetta said.

This conversation was supposed to be about the missed bin of mail, Stan had been sure. He looked at his hands, confused, lost for words. The woman was watching everything. "Sir, I can explain."

"I don't need you to explain. You just have to stick to the schedule."

"I know. I just feel bad if I don't go out."

"You need to try, Stan. You need to think of what's best for everyone. If I let you come in off schedule, and pay you, then everyone will want to do it. I just can't."

"I'll try," Stan said.

"No, I don't want you to try. I want you to do. You know as well as I do that they're shutting us down. Facilities are closing all over the country," Calnetta said. "We just have to work through it."

"Alright," Stan said.

"Don't get bent up over this. Think of it as an easy transition. Spend some time with Eleanor."

Calnetta was smiling as Stan left, but he couldn't pretend to be happy. Everything was falling apart. He didn't want to go home, he wanted to stay here, to work, but he couldn't. And even if he could, there was Kathy, right beside him.

The ride home didn't make him feel better. People in hulking cars rushed around him. They were going places and didn't have time for his little car and his slow progress. Everything was moving too fast. He wanted to park his car in the middle of the road, catch his breath. He wanted to jump back twenty years and savor things. Twenty or thirty years would be even better. That would take him back to when things were new. Before the post office, before he settled on Eleanor. When he thought he would move on after a few years of saving, make a go at his own business.

Instead he was here, turning into his driveway, late for dinner and nauseous. She would be mad. She would ask him why he was late, why he didn't call. She would take out on him the frustrations of a day so full of nothing to do, but worry about the kids or the house, or him.

"Only five houses today, Eleanor," Stan said when he walked in. His wife was reading and only arched a brow in response. She had been free of work for just long enough to still be able to talk about the job and at the same time, didn't want to hear it. The only thing that mattered to her was that he was late. "They're going to cut my route down. They'll have to."

"Stan, they cut it last month. You're only to go out every other day. No Saturdays," Eleanor said.

"I know that," he said.

He was standing in the kitchen, his wet boots dripping on the linoleum. The schedule Calnetta gave him was folded in his pocket, his three approved days highlighted. She would want him to clean the salt, snow mixture off the floor. She cared more about the floors and the counters and the carpet now. He sat his bag down on the kitchen table careful not to let it deflate.

"But you go out every day," she said as if trying to reassure him that she was still in the conversation. "Why so late tonight?"

"I had a lot to deliver," he said.

"Thought you said there were only five houses today?"

"They were really spread out. Half from my route, half from another. Splitting routes now," he said.

"Huh."

"Don't know what I'll do. They'll cut it down more. Cut it altogether."

"Let them," she said. "Letters can wait. It's time to rest now."

"I'll still go out."

"I know, I know," she said.

They didn't speak again until dinner. Eleanor liked quiet when she cooked. A new quirk to go along with her retirement and expanding waist line. Cooking as a hobby was new too.

Stan pattered around the house, moving things from one side to the other, picking up books and setting them down again. He couldn't get comfortable. He hadn't been comfortable all day.

"Dinner," Eleanor said. She would be in the dining room, waiting next to his chair. She also liked to dress up for dinner now.

Stan shrugged on a dinner jacket. It felt silly, just the two of them, having dinner dressed up. His slick, black shoes on the carpet seemed like overkill just in case someone was watching through the window. No one was watching from the window. When the kids had been in the house, when dinners were something that mattered this would have made sense.

The kitchen table was empty when he passed through and Eleanor was waiting in the dining room. She was standing behind his chair, fingers tapping on the high backed wooden rungs. He caught the end of a limp grimace when he entered, but she buttoned it up. She curled the edges of her lips into the perfect smile. A poor copy of the smile him and a high school buddy had fought over.

As they ate, Eleanor worked through talking points on a bright pink index card. This was also new. She wanted to make sure they kept conversation alive. If they kept conversation alive, their minds would stay sharp. She read this in a magazine.

"The problems overseas are just too much these days," she said.

"That's putting it mildly," he said. He knew the problems overseas. He listened to talk radio, read the magazines that were going out to houses on his route. The world was a mess and he didn't think that twenty or thirty of reverse would fix it.

Eleanor set her set down her silverware and folded her napkin over her plate. "If you don't like my talking points, you should make your own."

"I don't need talking points," he said.

"What would you like to talk about then? Work?"

"We don't need to talk about that. What did you do today?"

She looked at him blankly and refolded the napkin.

"How was work, Stan?"

He stood up, reached across the table and took her plate in hand with his. He didn't want to finish dinner in this room. He walked into the kitchen, placed her plate in the sink and set his on the kitchen table.

"Work was work," he said, seating himself at the kitchen table. He took off his dinner jacket and waited until he heard her chair push back. She came into the room, pulled back the chair she had sat in for breakfast and dinner for the last twenty years and sat down.

"How's Kathy working out?" she asked.

Of all the people that she could have asked about, the people they had worked with together, the managers that held onto their jobs after the first wave of layoffs, she asked about Kathy.

"She's fine."

"Getting along any better?"

"I get my mail, I get out of there," he said.

"That's not getting along."

"You're right, that's getting by," he said.

A question perched on her lips, but she shooed it away. Her glasses slid forward on her nose as she studied him. Judgment masked with concern. He sat up taller, squared off his shoulders and nodded at a look that bordered on disapproving. She would call their daughter later. Complain that he was being stubborn and wouldn't retire.

"Let's go out," he said,

"Tonight? With who?"

"Just us, tonight. Right now," he said. A tremor ran through his arms and he tried to keep the fork steady.

"Oh, Stan I'm not sure. Tonight? What about tomorrow?"

"Never mind, don't worry about it," he said.

After their nightly tea, and the hour allotted to this month's book club book, and prayers, and turning out the lights, Eleanor went to bed leaving Stan alone in the study. There were two desks in the room. A thick, walnut monstrosity was Eleanor's. It had been her father's and she moved it to each house they had owned. Seven moves over three states, but he wasn't counting. For its enormity, the surface was clear of clutter, holding only a few framed photographs of the family and a small computer with a bright pink cover. It had been a gift from our grandchildren. The kids wanted to see more of them and that was the answer. A trip to visit in person would have been money better spent, but that is what they decided. Eleanor used it all the time. Not just for the kids and grandkids, but to play games and keep the world updated on their lives. Leave him out of it. He would poke his head into conversations with the kids, but that was it.

Henry's desk was smaller. It took up less of the room with a sturdy metal frame he had found at a scrap yard and a simple pine top. In contrast to Eleanor's desk, every inch of his desk had something on it. Not chaos, not a mess, but just stuff. He was not proud to admit it, but a number of items on his desk were things that never found their intended homes. He didn't like to think of it as stealing, more like saving them from being rejected.

He didn't keep much. Just a few things here and there, enough to fill up a box or two. Eleanor didn't bother his collection. She knew about it. Confronted him a few years before she

retired, but after that one fight, she never mentioned it again. He had lied. Said he only picked mail that was undeliverable and had only been collecting for a short time. In truth he had been collecting longer than he was comfortable admitting. Soon after starting the job, soon after he realized the track his life was on, his collection started. First he only picked nervously at the upturned edges of letters, reading them if they opened. Eventually he was copying letters, keeping them. It was this collection that he was worried about. He tried to be safe, but he was sure Kathy knew.

In the morning he rushed past Calnetta's office and most of the temps that stood in place of actual employees. He knew they were thinking the same thing he was thinking. This couldn't last. This had to end. This he didn't want. Dread marched into his chest, the same every morning while he loaded his truck. One, two, six, ten houses skipped. If the mailbox wasn't gone it hung open, space to spare. He could close the open ones, made sure they latched and the flag was secured.

"You put too much effort into that," Kathy said.

She had been quiet all morning. Stan had been enjoying their shared silence.

"Kathy, effort should be put into everything," he said.

"Nope, not everything," she said. She was smiling at him, her hands forking mailing into bins without looking at them. Careless.

"Yes, everything," he said.

He tried not to notice as her generous hips brushed brush against him. There was nothing about her he liked. Everything about her was off. Her smile was lopsided, dripping at the left corner more than just a little. And her laugh, while hard to explain, caught in the back of his

throat with a squeaking, snorting combination. A very uneven, unsettling sound he tried to avoided. Even her name irritated him. Kathy. It was common, dull. It was not Eleanor.

She set down another bin of mail, more junk, but stayed next to him. She was close and he could feel the polyester of her shirt against his arm. It felt like this woman had stitched together burlap and worn it. He kept packing as she stood, breathing.

"Why those addresses?"

"I'm sorting, everything. I like to organize my route," he said.

"I get that, but why those addresses? Those three are separated out."

"They're not."

"Yes, they are," she said. She was pointing at his carefully stacked mail, three piles. He was going to rip them open at lunch to see if there was anything interesting. If he couldn't use them, he was going to repackage the mail, smack on a preprinted sticker that apologize for the damage and deliver them as normal. Kathy needed to go away. Take her momentary interest in what he was doing and go back to sorting.

When she reached for him, he batted her hand away. It was a snap of his wrist that was as quick as it was unintentional. His wedding ring nicked one of her knuckles and she retracted her hand and jumped back.

"What the hell, Stan?"

"Language," he said, sweeping the mail into his bag and rushing to his truck. She was still standing at the storing table when he pulled out. At times, he blamed Kathy for Eleanor leaving him here alone and at other times, he blamed Eleanor for bringing him Kathy.

For a week he expected to be pulled into the office, sat down. Maybe Kathy would be in the office; maybe she would be waiting on the floor. The scenarios in his head played out differently each time. Sometimes he was screaming, other times so quiet he wasn't sure he was alive, but the ending was the same. He was fired and Kathy was happy.

But, it didn't come.

No word from his supervisor.

No word from Kathy.

No way for Stan to relax.

He watched Kathy work. She was actually working, not the whole day, and not at an even pace, but she was working. Head down, never looking up at him, she was working. He didn't like it. There had to be a reason things were so quiet. She had to be working on some way to get him in trouble. If he couldn't let it go, there was no way that she would let it go.

"I know what you're doing up. I'm not stupid," he said as he passed to get pick up his mail. She had sorted the bins so fast; he was backed up on loading his truck.

"Stan, I'm not doing anything."

"You are and I know it," he said.

"Just take your mail. Get a head start on your route," she said.

"I don't need a head start. I need you to stay out of my work."

"Alright, Stan. Alright."

She backed away, leaving him with an empty sorting table. He didn't bother looking through the mail while he was out. He lingered at mail boxes; put the wrong letters in the wrong places. The last house on his route, 459B Wilson Lane, was part of a house. It was one of those

subterranean apartments that the city may or may not have known about. There was a woman that lived in the apartment, mid-thirties, who lived alone with her younger son.

Stan felt like he knew this small, two person family. He knew that the boy had a learning disability, that the mother was still going through her divorce, and that the father wanted sole custody of their son. He shouldn't know these things. Those things were private, but he found their life irresistible. It wasn't that it was abnormal, many families went through these same challenges, but he wanted to know more, be more connected to them.

They were home, they were always home. The little boy watched him from a low set window that came to mid-calf. Every day, there were his wispy blonde bangs, draped over a crinkled brow and small, crooked nose poking out of the curtains. There was a stern look to him, no smile, and no laughter. He just watched Stan come and go. When Stan waved to the boy, smiled and held the mail up, he disappeared from the window and reappeared at the door. Stan froze; he didn't want him to open the door. He willed the door to stay closed, but it opened, just a crack— the chain still attached.

"Do you have a letter from my grandma?"

"I'm not sure. What's her name?"

"Grandma," the boy said.

Stan juggled the mail around in his hands while the little boy watched him. He was holding his hand out through the gap in the door.

"Maybe this one?" Stan said, setting a letter in his hand.

The boy took the letter, scanning the hand writing on the front. He nodded to himself and tucked the letter under his arm. "This is it," he said.

"Good. I'm glad you got it. Have a nice day," Stan said. He wanted off the porch.

"Why didn't you open it?"

"I'm not allowed to open the mail I deliver," Stan said.

"But you open all the other letters. I know, you put the stickers on them."

"Oh, that doesn't mean that I open them. Letters get damaged all the time," Stan said. He was sweating even though it was cold out. He didn't know how this little boy knew, but he knew. "I should get going," he said.

"I don't mind, you know," the boy said. "I was going to write you a letter, to see if you would read it, but my Mom said I was being silly. I'm going to do it now that I know for sure," he said.

"I really have to go," Stan said. He stumbled down the walk. He tried not to listen to the boy.

"Will you read it?"

"Sure, I'll read it," Stan said. The truck door shut, the apartment door shut and he was alone. Someone told the boy that he was reading their mail. No matter how much imagination the boy had, there was no way that he came up with that on his own. A damaged mail sticker didn't mean that someone had read your mail. No one had jumped to that conclusion, in all the years. No one. Kathy was the only person that was watching him. She must have seen the addresses he was sorting. That had to be the letter in her hand, an example of the letters he was setting aside. She was trying to get him fired.

He rode back to the warehouse with and undelivered mail on the seat next to him. He was going to confront her. He was going to make her understand that he wasn't going anywhere, that she was the temporary one. She wasn't going to tell lies to Calnetta. He pulled into the lot,

leaving the mail truck at the entrance still running. He would finish his route when this was settled.

Kathy was easy to find. She was standing in the middle of the receiving floor, handing out papers to a few of the newer guys. They were hugging, her hands patting their backs. There was something happening and those men didn't look unhappy. Confused, shocked, but not unhappy. It was happening. Management was replacing the remaining full time employees. He was going to be forced out today, if Kathy hadn't talk to Calnetta. If she had, he was looking at no retirement, no health care, no money. This was real. His spine was stiff and hot in his back.

Kathy handed out another letter, handed out another hug. She gave away another job while he watched. When she turned, she was facing him.

"I see what you're doing," Stan said. He wanted to turn and leave, but he was too angry. "You're not a temp at all. You're one of those staff reduction bastards."

"No, I'm just a temp. Calnetta just asked me to hand these out," she said.

"Those are reassignment letters, aren't they? You're giving those new guys our jobs." He swept his arms around the room when he said this, but there were no old timers around him. Just him, standing in the middle of the room with machines humming and spitting out mail.

"No, they're not. You don't know what you're talking about."

"I sure as shit do. You have been trying to get rid of me from the first day I started. But you can't. You don't have anything on me. You think you do, but you don't," he said. With each word out of his mouth, he felt better. He had been polite for too long.

"Here take this," she said. She was holding out an envelope. It was thick and had his name stamped on the front.

"I don't want it. Keep it."

"It's not mine. I already got me," she said. "Just take it."

When she got too close and the letter was almost in his hands, he reached out and pushed her away. It was a reflexive move like the day before, but harder. She flopped down on the ground in front of him, she legs twisted underneath at odd angles. The workers standing around watching the two of them rushed over to Kathy, offering to help her up, but Stan pushed them away too.

"I'm not done talking to her," he said. He was not a large man and when he stood over her, his shadow barely covered her body. She didn't look intimidated as he had imaged she would. She looked angry. "Why're you following my routes?"

"You're crazy," she said. She was trying to stand, balancing her weight on an arm for leverage. Stan used his knee and toppled her over again. She grunted and rolled over, cursing at him. "God damn it."

"The kid at 459B Wilson gave you away," he said.

"Who're you talking about?"

"It's on my route. I've been going there for years."

"Fine, I don't care," she said.

"Of course you don't care. You come in here, making accusations. Trying to steal my job."

"I don't want your job. Even if I did, there's no job to take, you stupid old man."

She rolled onto her stomach, pushing her body into an odd V shape to get up. When Stan went to knock her down again, she grabbed his leg and hauled him to the ground. There was a gasp from the ring of onlookers and someone ran to get Calnetta. Stan spun around on the trying to get a hold of Kathy, but she was all sweat and slick arms. There were other arms, not Kathy's

or Stan's arms in the pile now. Arms that were trying to pry them apart, but they fought to stay together.

It was a slow motion wrestling match where biting and gouging were not off the table. Kathy snapped at Stan as he pressed his hand into her doughy face. They both heaved for air, sucking it down in deep draughts. There was no room for words in between the shoves and ineffective holds. Neither fighter noticed when Calnetta rushed into the room. They also didn't notice when they were torn apart and ushered to other ends of the warehouse.

"My God, Stan," Calnetta said, pressing his arm against Stan's neck to hold him back.

"What is this?"

"She is trying to get me fired. She's lying to people," Stan said.

"You're trying to get you fired. Just, calm, down."

"No, I won't calm down. I know she's the one who told you about my extra shifts."

"You're wrong. Your wife called me, Stan. Eleanor called to let me know what was going on. She wants you to retire. She wants you to stay home."

Stunned, Stan pulled a hankie out of his pocket and mopped his forehead. "She wouldn't do that. It had to be Kathy," Stan said.

"I'm sorry, but it was Eleanor."

"No. No," Stan said.

"We're all gone, Stan. Didn't you get the letter?"

"I didn't take it. I'm not going to."

"You have to. There is no choice. We all got one."

Stan's body slacked and Calnetta pushed him away. He was holding the letter out and Stan took it. It was notification that their location was closing and they were not being

transferred. All new employees were being given a severance package and all retirement age employees would be shuffled into retirement. It wasn't happening; it had happened. Calnetta told him the letter had been going out all month. Stan had been too busy with Kathy that he didn't notice that the lunch room was emptier and people were walking around nervous and on edge.

"I didn't know what to do," Stan said.

"You go home. Starting today you're retired."

Stan shook his head, felt the weight of the paper in his hand. If they had mailed the letter, it would have taken two stamps. If this letter had shown up on his route he would have opened it. He would have read over each page, feeling sorry for Stan Welcome. He would have wondered what Mr. Welcome would do next, where he would go. But he would have put the letter back in the envelope, sealed with the damaged mail sticker and delivered it. He wouldn't think about Mr. Welcome again, he would walk to the next house and the next, maybe open another letter. It would feel good to know that Mr. Welcome's life was strange and different from his. The distance to those problems had always been the appeal. Just close enough to see what was going on, but not so close that he would have genuine feelings of hurt or loss. This time it was too close. He knew the man in the letter. His name printed in dark, bold letters that he could see on every page.

You, Me, and Nothing Else

She had positioned herself in front of me so I couldn't look away. I could have focused on the ground or a street light, but I would round back to her in the end. She said my name, twice. She said it in a way that no one else could, in a way that made me feel like a bellhop or a willful child. I remembered loving it. I remembered hating it.

"Will she get mad that I'm here?" she asked.

"Doesn't know you're here," I said. Holding up a cigarette, I kicked at the snow with the toe of my boot. She stood in front of me, a little back from me, but still in arm's reach.

"I'm nervous," she said.

"Why?" I didn't know why she was there, standing on the curb with a hand on the car handle. She called. I came out and didn't stop to think why. Lied about needing fresh air and about not needing company, and came outside.

"I've been here before. Right here before. I shouldn't be nervous."

"You used to stay here," I said.

"This situation, I mean."

"Oh," I said. "Did I ever ask you to move in?"

"Is that important now?"

"I think so," I said.

"You didn't," she said.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure. You never asked me to move in, but you asked me to leave," she said.

"I don't remember that."

"It doesn't matter," she said. "The choice I made after is what matters."

"Okay," I said.

"Jesus, Oliver. I fucked-up."

"Okay," I said.

Her moves were choreographed— hands up in the air, hands at her sides. She would have practiced at home, in front of a mirror like she practiced for visits to her mother's house. Studied for a certain response, mapped out all the moves. She wanted a specific line out of me.

"You need to say something, right now."

"We all fuck up, Allie," I said.

"Think of all the ways I could hurt you. I've done them."

"It's okay. I said it and I meant it."

"You said it, but I don't believe you. How could you?"

"Do you remember that hike we took last year?"

"This isn't the time," she said.

She paced in front of me, so I sat on the curb. I wanted to counter her moves.

Her hair was pulled up in a loose bun, but there were strands swinging free. I remembered a time when she would let me twist the strands between my fingers. For me, her hair was summer, stretched end to end on a blanket in the woods. No need for music, just listened to the leaves and the insects. I caught fire-flies and she danced barefoot in the grass. She leaned so close to me, I worried that one word would consume her.

Her voice was a shudder. I strained to hear it in the damp and the snow. I could guess what she was going to tell me. We had created something and she had ended it. I didn't want to

think about it, I wanted to think of her face in the summer, still so white that she stood out from the rest of us burnt and brown. In this snow, she was faded, far away.

"I should have written this down," she said.

"Who would read that book?" I asked as a joke. Neither of us laughed. "How many times?"

"A few," she said.

"Do you know how many?"

"Of course," she said.

She touched her cheek. She looked away from me. Her chipped, pink nails drew dinosaurs in the brittle snow. These were used lines. Used up and dry. If she cried these exact words with other men, she used the same slumped shoulders, the same evening call. I am no different for her, no need to feel special.

"How many?"

"You know, twice. At the most," she said.

I heard twice, but knew it was more. If it was two times, she would have said two, but she didn't. And she kept at it, telling me things that I didn't know— the procedure didn't hurt didn't cost much. Told me what I knew— she loved me, loved what we were, but I don't know. I never knew. She had been closed for so long. I didn't know anymore then she knew herself. Flecks of snow like instant potatoes cover my shoes, dry now, but they would be wet later.

"Are you still listening?"

"I never stopped," I said. I wondered if at some point I would be able to block her out. Add my own words to this conversation. Ignore what she is telling me and create a new story where she is giving me the worst, life altering news of my life. News that when I say it out loud,

would send away the girl waiting for me to come back inside. News that would end so many things, but start another.

She started screaming.

Curtains fluttered in the dark windows of my neighbors.

She never moved in so I could still call them my neighbors.

I could hear their ears, straining against new, double-pane windows.

"I just need your help. That's all," she said.

"I've a little bit saved. It's yours."

"It's too late for money. I've already done it. Paid for it a few months ago."

"Then I don't know what I can."

"Can I come in?"

"You know you can't," I said. It's too late to really help, but I make the offer because that's what I've been told to do over and over again. Be a man. Take responsibility. It is clear she didn't want responsibility and she didn't want mine. She wanted something else, something nameless that I couldn't give. It might have been a shoulder to cry on or a bed to sleep in, but I couldn't. Not after the long car rides with silent mouths and drumming fingers. Not after the sleepless nights spent with an ocean of sheets in between. Not after her confession.

"Is there anything else?" I asked.

I wanted there to be something else. I prayed there was something else. I was on my feet again. I was standing in front of her again, hands purposefully fold in front of my, purposefully busy.

"I should just go," she said.

"Don't," I said.

"You can't help. I know that."

"If you had come before," I said.

"Could you love me again?" she asked.

I tried to stay still, but it felt more stiff than still. I try not to let my face show that I may never have loved her. This was not the time. There would never be a right time.

She waved me off. She didn't want the answer any more than she wanted to come to me before she made her decision. I liked to think I would have tried to rationalize what she was doing, would have tried to find a better way for her. I couldn't find a reason to blame her. Yet at the same time, I find every reason— small, petty, selfish, my choice, my chance.

The cold had dipped into my fingers and I realized that an hour had passed and I never put on a coat. She looked warm, stalking back and forth. Her feet had melted the snow in a circle around her. If I inched closer I might have been able to warm my hands. She is an oil drum, burning on and on.

I suggested she keep her voice down. I said she shouldn't say things she'd regret. It was too late. She said that she didn't care what I thought, what I did. Said if it came down to it again ending a life was better than making one with me. She said everything. If there was nothing to be gained, if circles and snow angels are all that would happen, why did she come? A door cracked open from the apartment two doors down. The same neighbor that watched the two of us drag a Christmas tree inside the wrong way.

Under my feet, hidden by the snow there might be a few of the tiny, green spears that fell of the dead branches when I drug the tree back out in March. There might even be glimmers of the tinsel that the dog ate. It had been her idea, holiday spirit. I grumbled when she drove me to Christmas tree holding pen that had popped up on Parsons Street. They would lose their needles

I warned. She didn't care. They looked sad I had said. They were trees, how could they look sad, she had said. They have been cut down, ripped from the earth, how could they not look sad? She laughed. She laughed and pulled on the branches. She laughed and decided to name all of the trees. I walked away when she decided to take home Steve. Who names a tree, Steve?

I kicked at the snow again, certain that parts of Steve were ground into the asphalt. This was his final resting place. This is where goodbyes are said.

"Are you sure, I can't come inside?"

"I'm sure," I said.

"You can ask her to leave," she said.

"I can't. She lives here."

"Oh," she said.

She knew. She had to know for months, but didn't want to admit it. If she said it out loud it will be true.

I head toward the door. At first I didn't think she noticed, but my footprints drew attention. They looked too big. Next to her everything looked big. She was shrinking in the street lights and I found myself wanting to pull her in, but I remember. I remember that she doesn't want the help I couldn't give her. I remembered that she was here to make herself feel better. I remembered she had been here before on a different curb, or apartment with a different man.

Goodnight is all I could say. Goodnight and I'll see you around. And I will see her around. She will be everywhere. Not on purpose, but the circles are small. She will be a date at a wedding. She will be a waitress on my night off. Each time I see her and even when I didn't, I would be reminded of the times before, the two or four times before. If I had known her history

would it have changed anything? Would I still have brought her into my home? Would I have let her get into the car while she was still crying? How was I to know what she was crying about? She wouldn't tell me and I was too stupid.

"It was supposed to be just you and me. Nothing else," I said.

"What if I had wanted more?"

"Is it getting colder?" I asked.

"I think I would have wanted more if I knew that was an option."

"It is getting colder. I should go back inside."

"Yeah, you should," she said.

She is in her car and gone before I was in the apartment. Inside the heat was on. Inside a curtain rippled, disturbed by the brush of a hand. Later there will be questions asked and stories told. Later when the house was quiet and sleep was resting heavy on my chest, I would cry. It would be a soft, passing cry of someone who doesn't know what they've missed, but knows that something is missing.

No Such Thing as a Pity House

Evan tripped over a moving box abandoned at the foot of the stairs. There were boxes all over the house, dotting the living room, the kitchen, and the hallways. He had no idea they still had this much stuff. Kicking the box out the way he fumbled against the wall, trying to find the light switches. No luck.

"Lucy, why did we move again?" he called up the stairs. His voice crept into the dark, feeling through the foreign surroundings. He didn't know how many stairs there were in this house. He didn't know if the landing turned left or right. It was too dark. Lucy had been making trips to the house for a few days now, but today was the first he had been to the house. He had held off as long as possible, but the lease was up at their apartment and he couldn't avoid the move any longer.

"Because if we didn't, we would have seemed ungrateful," Lucy said.

"Ungrateful isn't a bad thing." He tried to keep a joking tone, but ungrateful was exactly what Evan wanted to be right now. He hadn't bought the new house for them; Gideon, his cousin, had lent them one. The house was one of the many Gideon had acquired over the years as an investment. One house given to him by his father had turned into two, then three, and how he had over twenty. Money from rentals and sales gave Gideon time to pursue most anything he wanted. Fueled only by monthly updates from his mother, Evan found out the novel Gideon had been toying with had been picked up by a publisher. The book hit the bestsellers list about the time Evan lost his job at the investment firm. Glossing over his loss, Evan's mother told him the book was a delight to read, so realistic at times that it felt more like a memoir than fiction. Ten weeks at the top and counting, she said almost singing. She was a big fan of Gideon. When

Evan was younger, he had been a big fan of Gideon too. They had been close— tree house building, frog catching, blood brother close. But their relationship fell apart when Gideon moved in with Evan's family.

A light flipped on at the top of the stair and Evan could see Lucy's shadow in the hall. She was in the master bedroom, setting up what little furniture they had brought with them. Pushing a few more boxes out of the way, Evan climbed the steps and leaned in the doorway. Lucy was dancing around in her socks, sliding over the polished wood floor. The room spread out around her with high ceilings and wide, yawning doorways. Their twin bed, two night stands and a dresser sat in the middle of the room, leaving ample space around them. Evan eyed the places where the ceiling met the walls. In this room he felt infinitely small and cramped. Evan cleared his throat to get Lucy's attention, but to also clear his mind.

"Why such a big house?" Evan said. The house was bigger than their first house, the one they had picked out together, the one that Evan had carried Lucy over the threshold, the one they had to sell when Evan lost his job. Lucy turned to look at him, her smiling fading at the corners. "We don't need all this space. The apartment was perfect."

"The apartment was too expensive. Besides, does it really matter what size the house is? Would you feel better about this if the house was made of cardboard, sitting under a freeway overpass?" Lucy said.

Evan tried not to frown at her, but she was right. It wouldn't have mattered. "This just feels wrong. Feels like a pity house." Lucy laughed out loud, her voice bouncing off the naked walls.

"There's no such thing as a pity house. He's being nice, sharing his good fortune."

"Exactly, his good fortune. He's trying to rub this in my face."

"Jesus, Evan. It's time to be happy. It's time to start rebuilding. You need this fresh start, we need it." She moved across the room doing a few pirouettes along the way, trying to lighten the mood. Evan held out his arms and let her fold into them. He could feel things slipping again, tilting towards Gideon.

"I could've gotten us back on our feet myself. I didn't need his help. It just would have been like college again." He could feel her nod against his chest. Her hair tickled his nose, smelling of roses. "You liked the dollar menu, right?" She shook her head, but he could feel her shoulders shake, holding back a giggle. Swaying, keeping Lucy close, Evan began to whirl them around the room. He stared out slow, feeling the pull of each turn. He picked up speed until he could no longer focus on the walls, or the floor, or the lack of furniture. Lucy was laughing into his shoulder; her voice sounded like a ringing bell. Before their legs tangled, they collapsed onto the bed; gasping for breath and watching the ceiling tip drunkenly.

"This is going to be a good thing," she said, covering her eyes with the back of her hand.

"I know. I just need to get used to the idea." Evan stretched his arms about behind his head. Gideon's family had always had money, his father worked the stock market when he was young, making all the right decisions. Evan's father didn't follow the same path. He made enough to get by, more when he could, but they were happy. Evan had always wanted to be more like Gideon's father. He wanted to have more, never have to worry about where his next job was going to be. When he got his first job, the thought he was on track. When he got promoted, he knew he was on track. But now, after months of cold calling firms and sifting through the job postings, he felt more like his father. Evan kneaded his fingers in the comforter, trying to figure how much they had left in the savings. As the dwindling numbers filled his mind, Evan's hands connected with the hard edge of a book. Wrapping his hand around the

book, he pulled it from the covers and held it in front of his face. It was Gideon's novel. "You're reading it?"

Lucy snatched the book from his hands and sat up. Her movement carried a slight wobble. "I haven't started yet, but yes, I'm going to read it."

"Did you buy it or is it my mother's copy." The thought of her spending any of their reserve money on Gideon's book made Evan angry at Lucy in a way he had never felt before. This wasn't splurging on a nice dinner or a movie night; this was wasting money on someone who already had too much.

"Neither, it came with the house."

Evan sat up and looked at her; his teeth clinched. "You're kidding right?"

"You know that nice built-in bookshelf in the living room? When I went to put our books away, I noticed it was sitting on one of the shelves," she said. The sound of her flicking through the pages filled the space between them. "There was a letter with it. I thought it was a welcome letter, but I'm not sure what it is. Here," she said, pushing both the book and letter into his hands.

"No, I don't want to read either of them. And you shouldn't feel obligated to read it either. He's letting us live here, no strings attached. Remember?"

"I don't feel obligated. I want to be able to talk with him about the book. I don't know why you wouldn't want to read it," she said offhandedly, moving off the bed and setting the book on the night stand. "I need to do my stretches before bed. Have you seen my yoga mat?"

Evan gapped at her as she shuffled around the room, rummaging through boxes. He could think of a number of reasons not to read the book, but he wasn't sure if any of them would make sense if he tried to tell her. "When do you plan on talking with him? Isn't he on a book tour or something?"

"He is, but he is going to be passing through town. Found it," she said, holding up the mat. She rolled it out on the floor and began to contour her limbs. "I thought it might be nice to have dinner with him. You know, celebrate his book, and break in the new kitchen."

"Lucy, I don't want him here. We haven't talked in years and I don't want to start now."

"Why? What could be so wrong with having him over, one night, to say thank you for this?" Lucy said, waving her arms around the room.

"I just don't want to."

"You sound like a child. You know that, right?" She finished a few more stretches in silence then rolled up the mat.

"I have my reasons for keeping him at a distance. You don't know what he's like."

"I would like to. He's family and from the way your mother talks the two of you used to be so close."

"We were close, but it's been years. Trust me, if we let him into our lives any further, we will never get him out." He reached out for her, but she shook her head. "I don't want to fight about this."

"Then don't. It's one dinner, you can live through it."

"I can suffer through it."

Evan sat at the kitchen table with the paper spread over the place settings. There was something about the feel of newsprint that made the jobs feel more real, more attainable. In front of him, Lucy rushed between the sink and the stove. With the help of a few nights on the couch

and a frigid bout of the silent treatment, Lucy had convinced him to have Gideon over for dinner. Stealing glances at her as she worked, Evan smiled. He was glad the fight was over and she looked happy, swinging from task to task. He noticed a glimmer through her hair; she was wearing the sapphire earrings he had gotten her a few years ago with his first bonus check. He looked back down at the paper.

"Are you staring at me over there?"

"Nope, just leering at you," Evan said.

"Finding any good jobs?" She stood at the sink, wiping her hands on a soggy dish towel.

"Not yet. There isn't much out there," Evan said, looking back down at the paper. What he really wanted to say was there wasn't much out there with his track record.

"You'll find something, don't worry." He nodded at her, running his finger down another column of jobs. "I forgot to mention it the other day, but I got a second interview with Shady Lane elementary," she said, turning to stir one of the pots. Evan looked up at her, shocked. She hadn't mentioned the first interview. "It's just a formality really. I should be starting soon."

"When did you apply?"

"Pretty much the day I found out we were moving here," she said. "It's going to feel good to be teaching again."

Evan felt a twinge of guilt in his chest as he watched her cook. Why hadn't she told him that she was looking for a job? Did she think he couldn't handle it; her having a job and him sitting at home? A year had passed since he made the poor decision at work that left him without a job. When they hired him, his eagerness had been a selling point, but when he lost over a million of the company's money, his eagerness turned into a liability. Knowing that all of his

colleagues thought he was a joke had been hard, but now Lucy. Down the hall the doorbell chimed three times. Evan folded up the paper and tossed it in the recycle bin.

"Lucy, your guest is here."

Flicking off the burners, Lucy wiped her hands clean and headed for the door. She took the long way around the marble island that jutted into the kitchen. Keeping her eyes down, she moved past Evan, letting a hand slide around his waist as she passed. He reached for her hand, but she was out of the room before he could grab it.

"We can still call this off," Evan called after her. "He doesn't know we're home yet."

Evan moved to the island as he listened to Lucy in the entryway. He held his breath as the door cracked open, waiting to hear Gideon's voice. Would he remember it? Muffled greetings filtered into the kitchen. They sounded happy, like old friends. Evan wanted to be happy like Lucy, but he couldn't. The sound of Gideon's voice, always a little higher than what people expected for his large frame brought back a rush to memories clouded by resentment. The echo of shoes on the tiles leading to the kitchen made Evan straighten up. He felt like he needed something in his hands.

Lucy came through the door first, Gideon following close behind her. They both had wide smiles on their faces.

"Look who I found at the front door, Evan," she said as if his arrival was a surprise. Lucy motioned for him to come over. Evan stayed at the counter and raised a hand to Gideon. He had hoped he would feel different when his cousin arrived, but he didn't. This was all he felt he could muster. Gideon nodded at him, raising a hand as well. Lucy stood between them, her lips pulled tight.

"It smells wonderful in here, Lucy. I hope you didn't go to too much trouble," Gideon said, his eyes trained on Evan.

"No trouble at all. I'm having fun actually. It's been too long since we've had a dinner party." She was looking at Evan when she said this, then quickly turned away. Embarrassed, Evan could tell the moment she said it, she felt embarrassed. It was his fault they didn't have dinner parties anymore. You can't have a dinner party if you don't have friends or money. Evan collected himself and walked to the liquor cabinet in the corner of kitchen.

"Not much in here, but can I get you something?" Evan asked Gideon. The two of them had done some serious drinking when they were in high school. It had been a rush for Evan, sneaking beers one at a time out of convenience stores. The drinking came easier for Gideon; his father always had liquor around the house. The bottles were never missed and another would always replace the empty slot on the shelf.

"I wish I could, but I'm going to have to pass. I'm on this cleanse right now. Something my publisher suggested I try. No booze for two months. But I brought you this." Gideon held out a bottle of champagne. "Needs to go in the fridge, but should be ready by the time we finish dinner."

"This cleanse, is it part of a twelve step kind of program?"

"Evan," Lucy said, reaching past him to take the bottle from Gideon. "Thank you, this will go perfect with dessert." She gave Evan a cold look as she slipped the bottle into the fridge.

"It's ok, Lucy. Evan knows how I like my liquor."

"Your dad liked his liquor. You, you were a drunk. My mom had to put a lock on the liquor cabinet at the house when you moved in." Evan poured himself a drink. His lungs felt

tight in his chest. The room was still except for the sound of Lucy, tapping her fingers on the counter.

"Gideon, can I show you around the house?" she said, breaking the silence.

"He knows what the house looks like, he bought it," Evan said.

"I would love a tour. I could tell when I drove up, the realtor's pictures didn't do the house justice," Gideon said, shifting on his feet.

"Perfect. Head back towards the entry way. We can start there. I'll meet you in a second." Gideon left the room, making a point to look at the crown molding as walked out.

Lucy wheeled on Evan, getting close to his face. "What're you doing?"

"I'm helping you host." He tipped his glass to her, taking a step back.

"This isn't like you. Did you start drinking early or something?"

"I'm just being honest. I don't need a drink to do that." Lucy threw her hands up in the air, let them fall to her side, and turned her back on Evan. Looking at her slumped shoulders, he felt the twinge in his stomach again. "Lucy, wait."

"It's one night, Evan. Is it too much to ask you to be civil towards him?"

"I'm sorry."

"While I show him around can you plate up the food? It won't take me long."

She walked out the room without waiting for his answer. While he dished the food into serving bowls, he listened to Lucy and Gideon tromped through the house. He only heard their footsteps at first, then Lucy's excited voice. The house, a big Victorian, had history behind every door and Lucy had taken it upon herself to learn everything in the few weeks they lived there. She grilled neighbors for information about previous owners and spent hours at the library and town hall going through records. She had told him a few nights ago when they got the house

furnished someday; they could get the house on one of those home tours. He didn't have the heart to tell her that all he really wanted was to move back to the apartment. Evan poured himself another drink and promised himself it would be his last.

When they returned both were talking in low voices, their heads close together. Evan thought Lucy looked flushed; Gideon was standing too close. Smacking a pitcher in the middle of the table, Evan pulled out one the chairs and sat down. Lucy and Gideon quieted and took their seats, Lucy next to Evan, Gideon across from them.

"Gideon was telling me all about his book tour, Evan. Sounds like fun. He's going to have another signing here in town in a few weeks, we should go. Check out the crowd."

"So, Gideon, you're famous now?" Evan said. A platter of meat hung from Evan's hand, pointing towards his cousin.

"I wouldn't say famous, but people have been reading the book. It's getting good feedback," he said. Gideon let his response hang in the air as he dished food onto his plate.

"Good, good," Evan said. He could hear Lucy, fiddling with her silverware. "Lucy, did you know both Gideon and I used to write when we were kids?" She shook her head. "We did. Stupid little stories about adventures we were going to have. We used to do everything together, before his father had his break down." Evan shoveled a fork full of meat into his mouth. "Right, Gid? Before you moved in and became the favorite."

"My father went into rehab, Evan. He didn't come out for three years. Your parents took me in because I had nowhere else to go."

Evan looked out the window as he chewed his food. He could see his parents' backyard in his mind, the day of his sixteenth birthday. All of his friends and family had been there to celebrate him. He swore he could feel the sticky August heat now, slicking the collar of his shirt

to his neck. Evan remembered Gideon's father, Uncle Tim, that night. He was loud and animated, running around the party, getting everyone drinks. A few of those drinks ended up in Evan's hands. His voice boomed over the backyard, making Evan's mother wince and whisper to the other guests.

"You're making your childhood seem much worse than it was," Evan said, stopping the memory. "I bet you even played it up in your book. Is that why your book is a bestseller? Did you tell the whole world how bad you had it?"

"I never exaggerated the bad, Evan, only the good."

Lucy reached over and squeezed Evan's thigh. All of a sudden the table felt too small, too many people sitting at it. The smell of food lingered around Evan, making his stomach turn. Glass in hand, he stood up and left the room.

"Where're you going?" Lucy said half standing.

"I'm done eating," Evan said over his shoulder. He wandered into the living room and sat down on their couch. The couch and one lumpy chair were the only pieces of furniture in the room. Around him the room spooled out in grand fashion: windows stretching from floor to ceiling on almost every wall, a number of build-in bookcases made out of the same oak as the glossy floors, and an impressive marble fireplace with carved cherub faces along the mantle. Setting his glass down on a moving box, Evan stood up and moved the couch two feet the left and stood back. The placement was better, but still off. He moved the chair next, scooting it opposite the couch at a slight angle. They needed more furniture.

"You know, Gideon. You could have furnished this place," he said, his head pointed towards the kitchen. The sound of clattering dishes filled the hallway, followed by the soft footsteps of his wife. When she reached the room, Evan was adjusting the couch and chair

again. "I don't think the problem is placement, we're just running low on furniture. We used to have a nice leather couch, but we had to sell that."

"Stop."

"Why? So we can continue our civil dinner?"

"No, that's a lost cause," she said, her voice was sharp. "Let's just sit down." Moving past Evan, she sat down on the couch, holding her own glass. Gideon came out the kitchen and stood near the fireplace that both the couch and chair were now facing.

"Evan, I'm sorry. If I had known coming over would have upset you this much, I wouldn't have suggested the dinner."

"How did you not think seeing you would upset me? You spent a good portion of my teenage years, trying to one-up me with my own parents. You didn't have it bad. I had it bad."

"I'm not going to argue with you."

"So you admit it, you had a shit father so you tried to take mine."

"No, I was just trying to be better, trying to start over. You were going the other direction."

Evan found himself drawn to Gideon. He wanted to hit him, sure, to pull him into his arms and shake the smug pity out of him.

"What should I have done? What would the me in your story do?"

"Evan, I think you need to take a walk; clear your head." Lucy's voice was firm in Evan's ear. When had she left the couch? He pushed her away, shoved her out of his way. He didn't want to be calmed to be settle like a dog.

"They didn't go to my graduation, but they went to yours. Did you know that?"

"Evan, you didn't graduate on time. You finished the summer after graduation, there was no graduation for them to go to."

"It was your fault I didn't graduate."

"No, all the drinking was the reason you didn't graduate. Not me."

"I was drinking because of you."

"No, Evan. That's not why you drink. You drink because you have no self-control."

"Why are you here, Gideon?"

"I wanted to celebrate the house, Lucy's new job, my book," Gideon said. "I wanted to see you again."

"You knew about Lucy's job interviews?" He looked around the room for Lucy, but he didn't see her. Why had she told Gideon? When had she told him? "That's not it. You're here to gloat." Evan pushed a finger into Gideon's chest. "You're here to laugh at the fact that you are rich and I ruined my career. That's why you bought us the house, to hold it over my head."

"I think you need to lie down. I'll come back when you're—"

"If you're not here to gloat, what then? Do you want my wife? You guys looked close earlier. Do you want to fuck her? If you let me know ahead of time, we can work out a time share."

"Jesus, Evan. Stop and think about what you're saying."

Evan took a swing at Gideon. It was wide, glancing off his shoulder and landing on the edge of the mantel. Evan righted himself, swung again, but Gideon held up his hands and backed away. He gave up. He collected his coat, said his goodbyes to Lucy. Always a pleasure he told her, like a sister he told her.

Evan didn't try to stop him from leaving or Lucy from sleeping alone. He could only make his bed on the couch, keep company with the TV and wait for the morning. Could be better in the morning, could be worse, but it would be different.

The light in the living room got brighter and brighter until Evan couldn't ignore it. He pressed his face into the couch cushions, but the light crept around his cheeks and into the folds of the fabric, into the headache he deserved. Throbbing was all he could feel when he sat up. A steady pulse started as undefined pain in his head and radiated through his fist. Everything hurt. Taking too long on jelly legs, Evan stumbled around the living room until he found the stairs. The house was quiet. At the top of the steps he found the bedroom door close and locked.

"Lucy, are you in there."

"Go away, Evan."

Evan pressed his head against the cool wood of the door. He could hear the sound of zippers closing. Small parts of the night came back to him. "I'm sorry, Lucy."

"You're always sorry, Evan."

"Last night is a blur for me, but I know that I didn't handle things well." Evan pulled his head off the door as the lock popped and the door cracked open. Lucy was standing in the doorway, her beautiful face smeared with tear and eyeliner. Evan took in a breath and brushed the hair away from her face. She pushed past him.

"No, you didn't handle the night well." As she moved by him he could smell a hint of rose. "You need to make this right, Evan." He didn't reach for her as she hurried down the stairs, but he followed.

"There is a signing tonight, for Gideon's book. I want you to go."

"I can't do that," he said.

"Then I can't stay with you. You need to do this. Not for me, you have done enough for me. You need to do this for yourself."

Evan found it hard to be in the house after Lucy left for work. Every time he walked through the living room he could hear scraps of his own voice repeating the things he had said at dinner. They reminded him of another fight. Closing his eyes and covering his face with his hands, he could see the fight between Gideon and his Uncle Tim clearly. The fight that had horrified his mother so much that she insisted Uncle Tim could no longer care for Gideon. They would take care of him. There had been screaming. Evan watched Gideon stand, calm faced as Uncle Tim berated him. There was something familiar in the way he yelled, something repetitive. Instead of taking the insults that day, Gideon wound his arm up and threw his fist at his father's chin. Gideon was fast, but his father was quicker. The two dropped to the ground, heaving, throwing poorly aimed punches at one another. A week later Gideon moved in to Evan's shoebox sized room. Something in Gideon had changed, he wasn't the same cousin he was weeks before. He was quiet, studious, a glaring opposite of how Evan acted.

Evan left the house before Lucy got home. There was nothing he could say to her, no way to express the shame he felt so he left no note. Dinner from a street vendor and drinks at a local bar brought him close of the bookstore where Gideon was signing books. He stood outside

for a while. Watched the backs of people standing in line, watched them nod and clap at the reading.

It was almost over when Evan went in. Gideon was reading in a dwindling, choppy voice. Evan thought that he might be close to tears, even though he had never seen him cry. He was talking about two boys, friends who were almost like brothers, but angry, fighting brothers. One boy was drunk, one homeless. Gideon was crying now. Evan pushed a little close to the stage, but stopped before he got too close. Gideon's emotions were too real, too honest. He was human and Evan didn't like it. It was their story with a few changed names and added scenes. He never told Evan he was going to do this. He didn't get permission to put their life out there, put his life out there.

The crowd around him was reorganizing, forming a line to have their books signed. A woman next to him was brushing tears off her face.

"Why're you crying," he asked. His voice was sharp, but she didn't notice.

"It's just so beautiful, so real," she said, blotting her eyes. "And he reads with such passion."

"He's a fake. A liar," Evan said. The woman took a step away, smelling the liquor on his breath. "Go ahead; get your book signed, but that was not his story to tell, it was mine."

The woman took a wide step around him, blending in the line. Evan had thought that maybe if he came here, heard the Gideon's story he would understand, he would be able to accept, but he couldn't.

He left without Gideon noticing him. Gone before he could give Gideon anymore for him to write about. He would tell Lucy that they talked. If they had talked he would have told Gideon that this book wasn't enough. That he needed more time than was left to give. He would

tell Gideon that he was not jealous of his money or fame, even though they would be nice. He would tell Gideon to find another way to get the past out because this was keeping the past fresh for him. He would tell Gideon to stay away from him; space was what he needed more than a house. But he didn't talk to Gideon and he wouldn't talk to Gideon. He would move out, he would leave town with Lucy, but he wouldn't talk to Gideon.

Between Us

I stepped outside and let the front door snap shut. The lacquered finish gleamed behind me in the sun, blood red. I couldn't run. I had to let Jenny get through the house showing. I didn't feel that I owed her this. I just felt guilty. Our current home, a small loft apartment close to downtown, was papered with listings, glossy print-outs of overpriced cookie cutter homes, and loan papers. Jenny was off her rocker excited about finding the ideal house to craft her family.

This particular house, nestled at the end of a manicured cul-de-sac, was the perfect house for Jenny— sprawling and ordinary. The lawn, crisp and green, which I would be expected to mow, was the right size for a play area, suitable for both children and adults. I was told that I could build a tiki bar or barbecue pit. I could see it now, two kids— one boy, one girl —both blond, even though neither Jenny nor I were blond. A slobbery dog would bound between the children, and I would be found standing behind the grill wearing an apron and a smile. There was less air in this version of my life. This me knew his next breath wasn't guaranteed.

I walked off the porch. I sat on the steps. The rutted limestone felt cool and reassuring underneath me. *Don't worry*; the steps seemed to whisper, *this house is out of your price range. Jenny will understand and move on.* Fishing in my pocket, I pulled out a worn, silver lighter, a gift from another life, and flipped it open and closed. With each pass, I let my thumb rub against an engraving of a four-leaf clover which had long ago lost its color. I had pretended to quit smoking two years ago to stop Jenny's snide comments on the cost of cancer treatment. I found myself doing a lot of things just to make Jenny stop. There were moments when I thought she suspected I was still smoking; biding her time waiting for me to slip up. After a year of my fake quitting, she gave me an antique cigarette case, said I could use it as a wallet. I remember

looking at the case, then back at her. The slight crook in her nose, the remnant of a childhood trauma I couldn't remember, seemed to give all her smiles a pretentious slant. I accepted the case, I even put my credit cards in it, but hidden underneath them were two or three smokes, bent, but still viable. I couldn't help myself.

I moved to the curb, further away— safe distance from the house. I pulled the case from of my pocket and stole a cigarette out. I savored the taste— rebellion in a small, neat package. A pod of young boys walked past me. Their close shuffling steps covered the hushed tones of their conversation as they eyed me. One boy in particular, bigger than the others, with a mane of shaggy red hair, held my stare with cold blue eyes.

“Hey,” I said.

All conversation died. The red-headed giant curled in lip in a fuck you sneer. I returned his sneer with a flick of ash. I wanted him to stop and yell, throw a rock. I would have accepted him spitting at me. I wanted something to keep my mind off the ten feet between me and the car. Big Red's expression didn't change. He didn't try to spit on me. He just walked past with his zombie mob shambling after him. I vowed to remember this encounter when the fight over the house started later. This neighborhood was not safe. There were gangs of children roving about, waiting to rape and pillage.

“Don't mind them,” a voice said.

I whipped my head around, trying to locate the voice. A thick wall of block shaped bushes pushed in around me. From over the greenery the voice came again.

“I said, don't mind them.”

“I heard you the first time,” I said.

“Oh.”

I pushed some of the branches aside, but only saw more branches. As I examined the pink flowers with their delicate ruffled edges, smoke rings crept over the bushes, blocking out their sweet smell.

"Are you part of the welcome committee?"

"Did you buy the house?"

"No," I said.

"Too bad," she said. I could hear her inhale, the crackle of burning paper, and her even exhale. "This is creepy."

"Fair enough," I said, trying to see through the close-packed green leaves. I caught a glimpse of pale skin, the ragged edge of torn jeans, and the hint of an eye.

"You should come over here."

"No, I should stay over here." I should have gone back into the house, start my attempt to avoid buying the house, but I didn't.

"How old are you?" she asked.

I hesitated. That question. "I'm thirty."

"Wrong."

I choked on the smoke of my second cigarette. "'Wrong'? What the hell do you mean, 'wrong'?"

"I can tell you're lying, you paused too long." She sounded pleased with herself.

I flicked my cigarette over the bush at her. "I'm thirty-five. I turned thirty-five last week."

"Thirty-five, wow. No sports car? Are you waiting for the red model to come in?"

"How old are you?" I asked. I was putting my money on sixteen and a few weeks. If that was the case I would go straight inside. Or I could wait in the car, not driving away, but drumming on the steering wheel until Jenny was done.

"I'm twenty."

Stunned, I tried to peer through the bushes to get a better look at her, but the leaves were too thick. What the hell were they feeding these bushes? I could hear Jenny and the realtor cooing inside, and my stomach tightened. I sat back down. The girl.

"So, don't you think you're a little old to be hiding from your wife while she picks out your family home?"

"I'm not hiding, I'm waiting. And she's my girlfriend."

I was waiting. I was holding the predictable progression of life. I was hoping that Jenny would wake up one morning and come to her senses. Kick me out. I didn't belong in the world she was trying to create. Time was playing tricks on us, making both of us think that it was time to settle down. Jenny had promised we weren't going to be this couple. We were going to be different, less obvious. I could have left her, but I was a coward looking for a fight, a catalyst that would breed and multiply so much that Jenny left. I felt cheated.

I looked at the flaking skin around my fingernails; it was turning yellow. How did Jenny not notice that? I fingered my keys.

"I'm out. Do you have another one?" the girl asked.

"Sure," I said, pulling the last cigarette out of the case. "What's your name?"

"You can call me Kennedy," she said. She stood up, reaching her arm over the bushes. Her skin held a translucent blue color that was a shock from the green that surrounded us. I

stood to pass her the cigarette. A mop of red hair, piled on her head and secured with a pen, clashed with all of the green. She didn't look twenty.

"Is that your name?"

"It's what you can call me," she said.

I watched, transfixed, as she struck a match. I envisioned myself groping her, pressing her against a gritty brick wall in a back alley that didn't exist in this neighborhood. I envisioned her being born while I was in high school.

"What's your name?" she asked on her fist exhale.

"Bishop."

"A religious man living next door, interesting."

"I'm not."

"Not what? A religious man or living next door?"

"Neither."

"We'll see," she said and walked away.

I watched her go into the white house next to the house that could be mine. I watched the door shut and moments later the curtains move in a room on the second floor. She had pulled one side shut, but left the other open. It was on purpose. I hadn't seen her look to make sure I was watching, but she knew I was, just as she knew I was lying about my age. She was passed back and forth in front of the window. I could feel myself craning towards the window, anxious for no good reason.

"Here he is, Jenny," the relator said.

“Oh honey, it’s just flawless,” Jenny said. She was bouncing down the path towards me. “Honey? It’s perfect, don’t you think?” she asked. She spun around until she was in front of me, blocking my view. “There’s even enough space to set up your workshop, finally.”

“Jenny, I haven’t touched my tools in years,” I said, putting my hands on her shoulders and pulled her in for a hug. I rested my chin on her shoulder so I could see the window. The curtains were closed now.

“Have you been smoking?” She pushed away from me and crossed her arms.

I took a few steps away from her. “No, I quit.” She needed more. “I was talking with one of the neighbors, he was smoking. I declined.” Her brow creased and she looked the two years older than me.

“Can we put an offer in?” she asked.

“We can talk about this later. Maybe after dinner tonight?”

“I know what you’re worried about.”

No, she didn’t know. I didn’t know.

“I can put in overtime until my next raise. The money won’t be an issue.”

I didn’t want to open my mouth, or nod, or do anything that might seal the deal. I felt like I was at an auction and any wrong move would result in my forfeiting any chance for a different life. I looked over at the plump realtor; she was practically salivating. Her pig-like eyes glinted at me from behind thick glasses.

“Bishop, please,” Jenny said.

I looked past Jenny to the window of the other house. I imagined that I saw the curtain move. “Ok, let’s give it a try.”

I remembered a bar years ago with music loud enough to get me in the door, but shit enough that the bass felt like a sway to the chest. The music was never from a band that I knew and looking back on it could have been a recording and not an actual live performance. The music was just loud. Todd would sit next to me abusing his drink. He was all tongue and bruised lips. We would try talking— who in the crowd we'd fuck, how many drinks it would take for me to jump on the bar and pee into someone's glass. In the end, the volume of the music reduced our conversation to nothing.

Todd leaned in close and yelled in my ear, "Do you want to rob a bank?"

"What?"

"DO YOU...WANT...TO...ROB...A...BANK?" As he enunciated each word I could feel the small hairs in my ear rattle, loosening long-solidified wax.

I shook my head, patted him on the shoulder and left the table. I needed another drink if I was going to listen to him go down that road again. Todd had once attempted a bank robbery in his home town of Admire, Kansas. The almost crime had started with a note, written in orange crayon, outlining his demands. The story varied with the level of drinking Todd was doing, but it all ended up the same— failure in a shit storm of bullets, a two year jail stay, and a vow to do it right next time.

I could see that Todd was gearing up, and I didn't want to encourage him. Todd was the destructive force to my apathy that threatened to pull me further down a path I was already on. From the bar I could see Todd was looking for a fight. He squinted his eyes in the smoke, balled his fists. In the time it took me to order a beer and take a sip, Todd was gone.

I remembered my mom telling me once, between sips of her own beer, to stay put if you were lost. So I stayed at the bar and watched the tide of people flow in and out with the music. Drunks out, sobers in. I logged a solid hour of people judging before Todd emerged from a back room, escorted by a stocky Italian. The man's short, slumped stature and red pitted face was frozen in a grimace.

Todd, now sporting a swelling left eye, was a friend I never expected to see after I quit college. He had shown up at my door looking for his girlfriend with a three-legged poodle named Muff and a sack of clothes. He said she used to live here. Said he used to live here. I listened to him rant for hours about his girlfriend—Tammy, Tonya, Beth—he didn't know and I didn't care. When he passed out I dragged him to the couch and went to bed. I should have asked him to leave the next morning. But instead of kicking him out we shared a stale beer and I asked him not to steal anything while I was at work. He didn't. After little consideration I had decided to keep Todd as a buffer. Next to Todd and his lost girlfriend and limping dog, I looked like a superhero, a saint even.

As I watched Todd being pushed through the bar I laughed. It was a harsh, braying laugh that startled me. I covered my mouth with my glass. Todd was almost lost in the crowd, but I worked my way towards him, I could pick out his bobbing, smashed eye. His good eye looked tired and furious.

Todd turned on his meaty escort and slammed a sloppy fist into the man's temple. The Italian shook the punch off like it had been a kiss and knocked Todd to the floor with one blow. The ripple of their scuffle radiated out into the bar turning the crowd into a mess of fists and missing teeth.

I struggled to get to Todd, he had the keys and I wanted to bail, but with each step I was pushed back by the tide of people. Focused, I ran into a girl standing in the middle of the dance floor. She was doubled over, laughing. I couldn't hear her laughter; the movement of her chest up and down like a hiccup. She looked at me, her cheeks smeared with tears and blood.

"Do you want to fuck?" she yelled at me, her hands cupped over her mouth.

"What?" I yelled back. That couldn't have been right.

"Do you have a duck?"

Duck?

"What-" Was all I could manage before someone, muscling his way through the crowd, knocked me down. As I collided with the beer slick floor I could see her continue to laugh at me, her cupped hands covering her mouth. She was close. I could smell her gin and tonic, her sweat.

"We need to leave," she said

I nodded.

"Now," she said.

I stumbled after her as she pulled me out of the bar and through a maze of alleys that spit us out on a dark corner. The street lights were out or flickering and I thought I could see movement in the small spaces in between buildings. She stood with her back to me, fiddling with her keys in front of a barred door. As my eyes adjusted I noticed the flicking street lights were faint flashers shining around her. The wet pavement shimmered around her. Heavenly, unearthly, I was transfixed. She stepped aside to reveal that light was coming from the arcade she lived in or above. The lights snaking around her were nothing more than cheap flashers, dotting grimy video games and she was just a girl. I moved close to her, pressing the length of

my body against her as she worried over her keys. Her hair smelled like peach cobbler and I could see dark roots showing through her dye job. She wasn't the light at the end of anyone's tunnel.

"You should go with your natural color," I said, letting my hands smooth over her straw hair.

"Nah, I've been 'blond' for so long now, I wouldn't recognize myself," she said. Her keys smacked on the ground. She knelt to retrieve them in a very lady like fashion, knees together, slightly bent, trying to put some distance between us.

Second thoughts, I could tell. There was a slight waver in her voice, and she kept throwing glances at me over her shoulder as if my closeness was not welcome, but she didn't have the nerve to say anything about it. I moved closer. She dropped her keys again. This time I bent to retrieve them.

"Here, you point to the right one and I'll stick it in," I said. She started to giggle, her body shaking. I took a step back, holding the keys at arm's length. I couldn't tell if she was just drunk or crazy; either way I was starting to have second thoughts.

"That one," she managed. I held up a crooked brass key and she nodded. The key turned and the door popped open, letting out a rush of stale air. I walked a few feet into the arcade, running my hands over the games. She watched from the door way and bit her nails. I stood in the center of the room not sure if she wanted me to say something. Had I asked her name before we left the bar? I couldn't remember. I started to think that she was going to tell me to fuck off when she let the door. She lead my past the Skee-ball lanes and air hockey. Up a cramped flight of stairs, past the door labeled manager, and into her bed room.

The next morning I tried to leave. She watched as I got dressed, my fingers tripping over the buttons of my shirt. She sat up in bed, the sheets hitched around her waist leaving her breasts bare. I thought about my unpaid bills, mangled roommate, and disabled dog waiting at home.

“Jenny,” she said.

“Bishop,” I said, extending my hand out to her.

"Stay," she said. I did.

Staying with Jenny that morning stretched past the day and landed us in a relationship with years under the belt. We made plans in those early years to always be spontaneous, knowing that making those plans removed any spontaneity. Jenny had an impulsive streak that I wanted to feed, but as time passed she began to cling to me. I become her project, someone she could polish up and use as the catalyst to her dreams. I didn't fight it; being led was always easier then leading. To a point, I led her on. I thought I could ignore the driven side of her, the stay up until two am talking about every possible aspect of our lives side of her. After spending countless hours, over many glasses of wine, we convinced ourselves that life was getting better, that *we* were getting better. We moved out of her ratty apartment above the arcade and rented a loft in a better part of town. She got a better job, better friends. She got me a job, one that mimicked how I tolerated her. We held dinner parties for new friends, and Jenny fabricated intricate stories of how we met— never involving the bar, or the sticky arcade, or her desperate groping handshake in the morning.

“Those two are headed down a bad road,” I said, handing Jenny another dish after. There had been fighting at the table that night and for once, it wasn’t Jenny or I. Friends had joined us for dinner, a sort of celebration Jenny created for finding the house.

“Who, Stella and Rob?”

“Yep,” I said. I held a fist full of tiny silver forks that we hadn’t used. “Can I put these back in the case?”

“No, we need to wash them,” Jenny said. Her back was to me.

I shook my head and handed the forks over. “You know, I really wish I had put some money down when those two got married. I fucking called it. One year.”

“Why would you say something like that?” Jenny said. She set a glass down with measured control and turned towards me. The muscles in her cheeks were twitching as she ground her teeth.

“Because, Jenny those situations don’t work out. She didn’t want to get married in the first place. He thought she would change once they tied the knot, but she didn’t. People don’t change.”

“People can change. We’re always evolving.”

“No, people hide what they really are, and how they think and feel. When it finally comes out, it looks like change.” For a moment, as the silence crawled around the room, I could feel her eyes at my back. I hovered over the remains of our dinner, and waited for her to turn back around. When the dishes started to clatter in the sink I let out a breath, and rubbed my hands over my face.

“We should get married,” she said.

I almost couldn't hear her, she said it so soft. I turned to face her— my heels dug into the wood floor as I pivoted. “Sure, let’s get married. I can wear the dress and you can wear the tux. It’ll be brilliant. Do you think we should hold the ceremony at the funeral home?”

“I’m not kidding, Bishop.”

“I am.”

“You’re just scared. Marry me,” she said. Her hands were wringing the life out of a dish towel. Her breath was coming short and quick like she was about to cry, but her eyes were dry and full of fire.

“You’re fucking right, I’m scared. I’m scared that you’re crazy. Why on earth would you want to get married? So we can turn into those two?”

“We wouldn’t turn into them; we’re not the same people as Stella and Rob.”

“You’re right, they’re better than us.”

“Marry me, Bishop.”

I backed away from her, bumping into the table and knocking over a wine glass. She winced when it hit the ground, but didn't look away. The light above the kitchen sink was winking behind her head as she shook slightly. The light reminded me of the arcade lights and the moment of hesitation that I had had then. I turned away from her and walked out the door without hesitation. I could hear her calling my name, shrieking my name, but I didn’t stop.

I stayed away for a week. A week off of work and away from Jenny. I sat in a motel room off the freeway, feeding quarters into the vibrating bed. I called my old apartment and got

no answer. I tried it again an hour later with the same result. Todd could have disconnected it, left the apartment. After then unanswered calls I had to know.

I got off the bed, the ground feeling too solid under my feet, and checked out. Without thinking about the directions, I was at my old apartment building. The name on the buzzer wasn't mine, but I wasn't sure if it was Todd's either. A woman came to the door not bothering to answer through the intercom. She stood at the metal gate, stringy black hair in her face and a baby on her hip.

"I'm not sure if you can help me. I'm looking for Todd," I said.

The woman responded with a toothy smile and signed at her with her free hand. The baby copied her gestures and cooed.

"I'm sorry. I don't know what you're saying," I said. I knew I had said that too loud, but I couldn't stop myself. She signed again and pointed into the apartment.

"Yes," I said. There was nothing else to say.

She let me through the gate and took me up the stairs I knew too well. When I stepped into the apartment I was shocked. It was the same apartment I had left, but better. The walls were painted a bright yellow with pictures of Todd and his new family hanging in rows. A wedding, their child's birth, a party.

The woman swept past me and motioned for me to sit on the couch. She had given up trying to actually communicate to me. The couch was springy and soft, free of crumbs. Down the hall I could hear Todd. His voice was the same, but his words were level and calculated. Resting my head on the couch, I listened to the one sided conversation. Todd didn't sound happy. Why was I there? Why did she let me in?

The baby had started to cry and I could hear the woman's awkward clucking as she tried to sooth the child. I didn't want to be there anymore. I could hear Todd coming down the hall and I panicked. Out the door and into my car before he came into the room, I didn't have time to breath. I didn't want to see Todd like this. I need to see the old Todd and I was terrified to see his face as calm as I knew it would be.

I dove home only stopping to buy a ring for Jenny. Leaning over the counter of a pawn shop, lost in a gold and silver daze, I bought the setting for a ring, tarnished silver with no stone. The clerk tried to tell me I needed a stone. I said no.

Jenny met me at the door the muffler of my car giving me away.

“You look like shit,” she said.

I tossed the ring at her and walked out of the room.

The time away from Jenny and our life did nothing to make the first week in the house better, it was hell. I found myself getting up early. I wandered a sea of brown cardboard boxes and glanced out the window hoping for a glimpse of Kennedy. I had started to think I had imaged our whole conversation. I hadn't seen the girl when we moved in or any day after. I felt sick. Sick of Jenny, of the house, of the fact that I was hoping to catch sight of a young girl. I kicked a box across the room and watched it bounce off the other.

I need to leave before Jenny got up. My job was in the same building as Jenny's publishing company and it infuriated her when we didn't carpool, but I wanted to drive alone. I wanted to be alone.

I sat in the car with the engine turned off; windows rolled up, and let the keys dangle in the ignition. I willed myself to start the car as the air thickened around me with the absence of the air-conditioning, but my hands wouldn't listen. I suddenly wished I had robbed the bank with Todd. If I had let him talk to me for two more minutes that night he would have convinced me to buy a gun from the guy on 23rd who sold animal skins, and loose meat sandwiches. The two of us could have torn the town up and I would never have met Jenny, or bought this house in a neighborhood. I punched the steering wheel. I should have done it. I punched the car again.

A sharp rap on the car window stopped my heart and my daydream. Kennedy was standing in the driveway peering into the window.

"So you decided to let her buy it?" she said. Her voice was muffled by the window.

I cranked the window down, sucking the in cooler air. "It's her money, she can buy what she wants."

"I'm glad you did." She bent down to look through the car window.

"Do you want to go somewhere?" I asked.

"With you? Now?" She fiddled with the frayed edges of her jean pocket.

"Yes," I said. I felt stiff and uncomfortable. I wanted to take back both my stupid question and my affirmation, but it was too late.

"You want me to get in a car with a man I don't know?"

"We don't have to drive. We could walk."

She evaluated me, chewing on her bottom lip. "All right," she said, walking around to the passenger side. I looked back towards the house; the curtains were open now and Jenny was watching us— arms crossed, lips pulled tight against her teeth. Kennedy yanked the door open and slumped into the seat, leaving the door ajar. "So where are we going?"

I fingered the keys in the ignition, but didn't turn them. The car made a dull beeping sound as we sat in silence. I could hear her breathing and a soft peeling sound of her skin on the hot vinyl seats. "I didn't think you'd get in the car."

"Why did you ask me?"

The minutes on the digital clock sunken into the cracked vinyl of the car's dash ground by. I didn't have an answer for her, but looking through the windshield at Jenny I thought I had one for myself. Jenny hadn't moved from her spot at the window, but her arms now dangled at her side, her jaw clenched. She was never going to leave me. So, I left.

I backed out of the drive as if I had forgotten to pick up something from the store and needed to go back. It was easy, easier the further down the street the car rolled. Jenny got smaller in the window. Smaller again as the house shrunk in my mirrors, smaller and smaller until both were gone.

"Jesus, you left her," Kennedy said. She was still sitting next to me, spinning a silver ring around her middle finger.

"I know," I said.

"You didn't leave her for me, did you?"

"No," I said and I was confident I meant it.

"I can't do this," she said.

"I know," I said again.

"I'm sorry."

"You're not and that's okay," I said.

I pulled the car over at the entrance of the neighborhood and let her out. She stood on the curb and watched me through the open window. Awkward on the outside of the car, she looked

like a collection of arms and legs that didn't know how to stay still yet. I thought of dodged bullets, of Todd and his new life, of Jenny's folded arms. I thought I was ready to move on, to take chances on chances that were not good bets. I would keep moving until the car ran out of gas, until the road broke up before me, until the space between us was gone.

In Theory, But Without Practice

Grenadine lived three stories up in a renovated fire safe building and practiced catching young men with syrupy drinks and wrapping legs. I remembered cold coffee and cat hair in the morning. I remembered that she was a mother, but I couldn't remember how I made it up the steps or what her daughter's name was.

"Making good choices is all up to genetics," she said while dressing. "She has the potential."

We were both sober and I was jealous of the night. Light across the room, strips of gold and orange were as unwelcome as they were warm. A tag sticking out the back of her shirt maddened me and I wanted to fold it down like I wanted her again, like I wanted food and water.

"Tell me her name again," I said.

"Millicent," she said.

"What's she like?" I asked.

She told me lies. She told me what I wanted to hear and went to the fire escape to smoke.

"Is she like you?" I asked.

She laughed smoke from her finger tips and hands. I didn't notice the lines around her lips and she didn't notice when I left.

I went out with her daughter, Millicent as a favor to Grenadine weeks later. I wasn't shocked to find her daughter wearing a tight, white dress when she picked me up even though we were going to the funeral of her former lover. I wore black for tradition and for lack of creativity.

"Do these shoes match?" her daughter asked.

They were gold and tall and the straps cut deep, red lines across her feet.

"No," I said.

She took them off and left them by my front door.

When we arrived, the deceased was resting in a mahogany coffin, hands crossed, wearing a hound's-tooth sweater. He was forty, twenty years older than I had expected. Standing over his body, her daughter told me sixteen had been a year set aside for experimenting with older men. Seventeen was a year for loving, while twenty was going to be a year for celibacy. Her daughter did not talk softly.

"I think I cared for his mother more than him," she said as we lingered in front of the coffin. "His mother was a peach."

"Did he like sweaters?" I asked.

"I don't know," she said.

I left the mourning line to pick over a buffet station in the corner. Finger foods, radishes shaped like roses, broccoli like forests with forks laid out in rows separated by wine and sodas. We didn't talk for the rest of the date and I worried it would hurt my chances with her mother. It didn't.

Grenadine turned away when I mentioned her daughter. She didn't want to hear. She wanted to be quiet next to me with her hands in my pockets and on my arms and chest. I struggled to stay quiet while she thanked me for the favor that never felt like a favor.

"Your daughter," I said.

"Would you do it again?" she asked.

"If I do, will you let me come back?" I asked.

"I don't care," she said.

I reached for her arm, for her hands that were always moving. I reached while she moved away. I asked her again, but she didn't care. I asked if I could stay, but she said that she was leaving. She was passing through my life and I would watch her leave because there was no other way to get her back.

In the alley next to her mother's apartment, I made a show of kissing Millicent. Bricks stacked on bricks crowd out the street around us. No room for mortar, no room for fingers or lips, just skinned palms and chipped nails. Out of her clothes, she looked different than her mother. All whites and blacks, her clothes were a shroud that hung off her funeral demeanor, a veil to cover her. Familiar hand gestures, a twitch, a brush to the side spoke of simultaneous youth and age.

"Don't leave me," Millicent said.

"You're not your mother," I said.

"I know," she said.

You're not your mother was all I ever said.

Green glasses folded into the front of Grenadine's shirt caught the light and men's attention. Desire cooled green in her sullen sighs and twisted gold with delight. Desire made me stay while she worked the room. I handed out drinks to every woman who wandered through the door. Drinks colored red for Grenadine, drinks mixed with whisky and cherries, with distrust and resentment. She didn't notice, just crackled on to her ring of other men. I slumped across the bar, pushed my nails into the soft wood, thumbed out the name Grenadine.

She licked the rims of drinks while I watched. She was all arms and smudged makeup, reaching inside pockets.

"I have a daughter," she said to a blond boy.

"You couldn't," he said.

"Do me a favor," she asked

She asked them all while I watched, had asked me while they watched. Flipped upside down, I kicked stools and wood and people when I left.

It was Sunday afternoon and I had lost the keys. I was drenched from the rain that fell up instead of down. It fell so hard that the drops clung to cheeks, clung to lashes. The keys were in the puddles that pooled around my feet. I walked into them and around them.

Behind me, dressed in blacks and whites, Millicent waited in the car. I was taking her to the zoo because she wanted to feel free, because Grenadine asked me.

We abandoned the car in the rain and walked. We walked past the big cats and the flightless birds to the turtles dripping salmonella on the glass walls. She watched the caretakers love them. Mossy mouths and cabbage tongues raked back and forth over leather gloved hands.

"How could they love something so hard?" she asked.

If I had had an answer I would have given it to her. If I could have placed her in the cage so she could understand how to love something so hard I would have. Millicent, tall and stoic, heavy and endless, stacked up against Grenadine who clung to youth with slender arms and legs. How could I love someone so hard?

Could she have looked down just once? Or was I adapted to always looking up? Grenadine came to want me when I was trying to forget her. Forgetting wasn't something that I was good at because I didn't want to be. I was good at Grenadine, thinking about her, touching her, wanting her. Once had not been enough. One night could never be enough.

"Satisfy me," she said.

"Where?" I asked.

"I don't care," she said.

I threatened to climb her fire escape; she paraded another man in front of the window. Too slow for her, too slow for a second chance to take seconds longer than before. Threatened to

throw myself off instead, but it would mean too little. Gripped the metal, gripped the rust; gripped the bricks and space outside of her life.

"Come down," I said.

"No," she said.

Addict, adolescent, accidental, I was all of them at once. Ashamed was more of a reality than a feeling when I came to realize how little I meant to her. One night at a time, with time in between was what she preached. New and brief is what she craved. I didn't want the in-between or the one night. I wanted and wanted and wanted. She didn't want, she took— my hands, my head, my fucking everything.

Fanatic, devotee, fiend without end or reason or preservation. I stayed outside in the pools of light under the lamps. Stayed outside until her light went off, until inside was a no longer an option.

There was no talk of father. Millicent talked of mother, of Grenadine in the morning, of Grenadine when she was asleep and dreaming. Fields of milk weed and swaying willows surround and compound the memory. Her mother was a mother in theory but without practice, removed and remote.

"We don't dream anymore," Millicent said.

"I've never dreamed," I said.

"You can't say that," she said.

"I just don't," I said.

I lay with my head on the swell of her stomach. I lay in the crease below her hip bones, my ear pressed over her belly-button trying to connect to the place where she once connected with her mother. Weak. Her connection was weak, had always been weak, and was only getting weaker as she aged and Grenadine stayed away. I listened in on their one sided phone calls. I listened while Millicent cried and screamed while her mother breathed and drank. Millicent, always the weak, the wounded, the weary. Millicent the one who tried me on months after her mother had tried me on, but had forgotten to take me off like her mother had. She should have taken me off. I wanted her to take me off, but she didn't, she wouldn't.

"Stay," she said as I breathed, as I ran my hand over her thighs. "Stay, stay, stay."

I caught the glasses as Grenadine threw them, against the floor, against the walls that still held our impressions. She had brought me up, pulled me up through the bars and the single-stalled bathrooms. Brought me upstairs because she couldn't bare her breasts or her soul without quiet. She sobbed while I fucked her. Folded over a table, she sobbed because of anger, because of hate.

"More," she said.

"No," I said.

"More," she said.

The idea of more terrified me, made me back off and away. Another glass against the wall, another hand to stop before the slap. I crossed the room as thoughts of leaving her before

the night was through crossed my mind. I stayed while she slept, while she pressed her knees to her chest and talked in her sleep. She called for daughter, for child. She did not call for me.

My shoulder was where they both rested. Their tears and lips, words and breath mix together. I didn't wash the shoulder, kept my head tilted towards their shroud, black from painted lids and lashes, to the subtle haunt of their voices.

Millicent was my consolation. Ready to fill in, stand in, to hold off my withdrawal with wrapping legs and bowed head. I did not want her or care for her or need her. Grenadine was the desire, the beat that kept me looking through crowded halls, keyholes, and windows for my next fix. I wanted to be pinned under her, near her, over her. I was ready to be caught again, to be used up.

"Come over," Millicent said.

"I can't," I said.

"You can," she said.

She sounded like her mother. She did not wait for an answer. Her apartment was open, doors and windows, walls with studs and the heads of Jesus nails. I found her wrist deep in warm water. I found her ready to begin.

I held her while she knew I wanted to hold her mother. She kissed my neck, my shoulders, my hands to be closer to me to her mother.

"Grenadine," I said to her while deep inside.

"It's okay," Millicent said as she pulled me closer, as she fixed me to her.

I lied until Millicent felt like her mother, until she called herself Grenadine, until she hated like her mother hated.

Used and wrinkled I felt myself twist on a line stretched between them. I didn't know how to end, how to bring myself out of their world. There were holes in my memory, slips and stumbles in a jogged line of nights and saturated days. They fought and forgot faster than they breathed, consumed more and more as I grew thin between them.

They called and called again. I resisted and reeled. I reminded myself there were other ways. They moved on in tandem. One followed the other as if there was no other way to move. I left last, left for good.

"You remind me," I said to someone new. I reached out and across to hands that were still. "Please, remind me."